MARIN COUNTY FREE LIBRARY
31111002274072

3393

Marin County Free Library
Civic Center Administration Building
San Rafael, California

3 1111 00227 4072

CENTRAL JAN 1983 APR 1 6 1976 MAR 1 2 '77 CMA
NOVATO ~~SEP~~ 1984

4 '77
5 1977
4 1977
4 1978
1978
3 1978 FX
1978
s
19/9
980
4I
992

DATE DUE

APR 1 8 1983
FEB 2 5 1985
JUL 2 7 1987
JUN 2 4 1991
MAY 1 0 1993
FEB 9 1994
MAR 3 1 1994
JUN 1 0 1994
NOV 2 0 1995
AUG 0 8 1997

OCT 1 8 1991 BOV
JAN 0 8 1992 ILL 544
JUL 2 8 1994
SEP 2 3 1994
JAN 3 0 1995
NOV 2 0 1995
AUG 0 8 1997
JAN 0 7 1998
Jan 2004
SEP 2 7 2008

210-25

EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY
EDITED BY ERNEST RHYS

FICTION

Marin County Free Library
Civic Center Administration Building
San Rafael, California

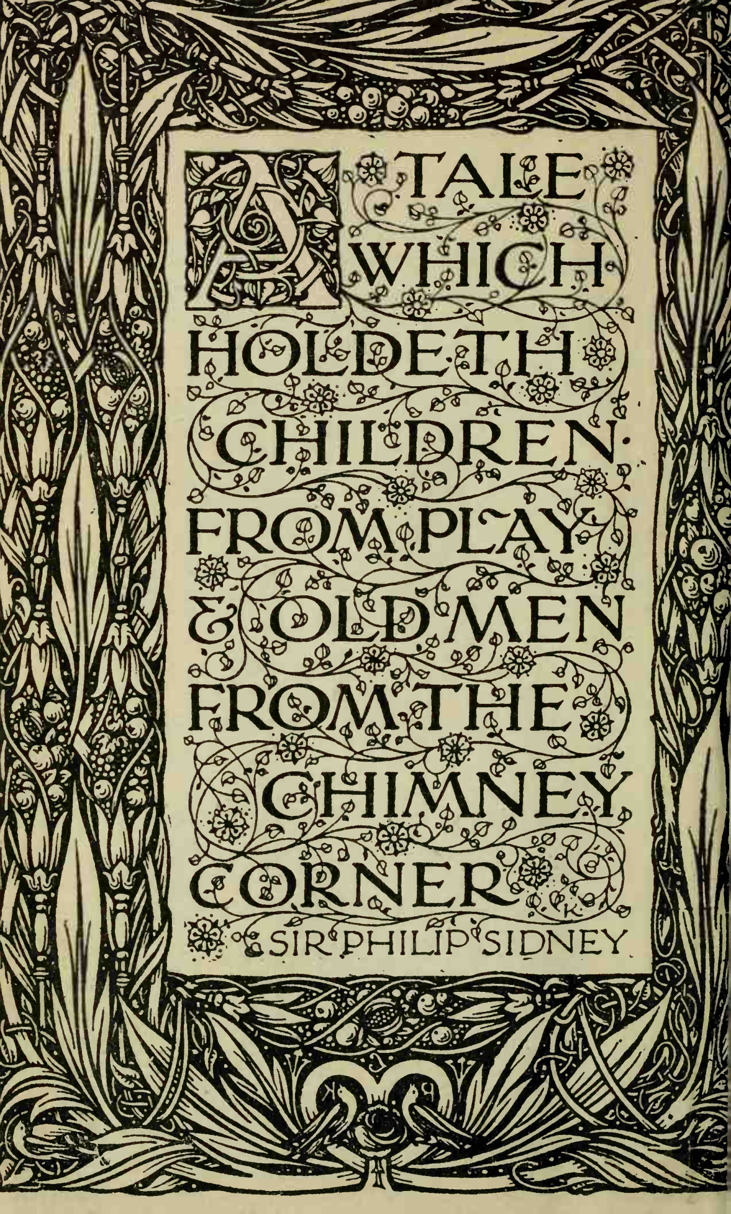
THE DEVIL'S POOL & FRANÇOIS THE WAIF
BY GEORGE SAND

THIS IS NO. 534 OF *EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY*. THE PUBLISHERS WILL BE PLEASED TO SEND FREELY TO ALL APPLICANTS A LIST OF THE PUBLISHED AND PROJECTED VOLUMES ARRANGED UNDER THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS:

TRAVEL ❦ SCIENCE ❦ FICTION
THEOLOGY & PHILOSOPHY
HISTORY ❦ CLASSICAL
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
ESSAYS ❦ ORATORY
POETRY & DRAMA
BIOGRAPHY
REFERENCE
ROMANCE

THE ORDINARY EDITION IS BOUND IN CLOTH WITH GILT DESIGN AND COLOURED TOP. THERE IS ALSO A LIBRARY EDITION IN REINFORCED CLOTH

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.



A TALE
WHICH
HOLDETH
CHILDREN
FROM PLAY
& OLD MEN
FROM THE
CHIMNEY
CORNER

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

THE DEVIL'S POOL & AND FRANÇOIS THE WAIF

BY GEORGE SAND.

3580
73
63

LONDON & TORONTO
PUBLISHED BY J·M·DENT
& SONS LTD & IN NEW YORK
BY E·P·DUTTON & CO

First Issue of this Edition . 1911
Reprinted 1923

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

3393

INTRODUCTION

La Mare au Diable and *François le Champi* belong to the work of George Sand that is destined to live, contradicting her own estimate of her power to endure and go on being read. The first story of the two must have seemed to those who read it in their susceptible days, when the pictures of Jean François Millet were giving a new interpretation to the ancient toil of the earth, like a woman's revelation, idyllic but true, true in art, of nature and man at his immemorial labourer's and peasant's task. There George Sand's imagination and her prose improvisator's faculty, her lyricism, her sentimentalism, seemed all to have been accorded by her genuine love for her fellow men and the realities of the experience through which she had gone.

She had submitted to great emotions, known love and its loss, been assayed in the fire and been tormented at the very points where a woman is most sensitive. The Revolution of 1848 had just passed, and had set free ideas that operated like a "Marseillaise" on the thoughts of those who cared as she did for the liberation of men and women, and were religious too with a theism that was personal and anti-clerical. She, too, was a revolutionary, in revolt against the odds that affect those who must earn their bread with the sweat of their brow, that weigh especially upon women, and that handicap the artist. But in these country idylls her too intense human hope and her artistic impulse were brought to an equation. Her narrative art gained the weight of conviction and the verisimilitude it had lacked in its fantasias and revolt romances. Moreover, it seemed as if the spirit of the fields, the woods, day and night, the elements themselves, had consented at last to accept her as their instrument. So if she idealises and idyllises, it is in the cause of truth to nature and human nature. She does not forget the splendour and subtlety of the colours of the day and night in the landscape, and the honesty and beauty of true love in country lovers, because of the mud on the peasant's brogues or the dirt in the farmyard.

George Sand began to write in 1830, first collaborating with Jules Sandeau and borrowing her own author's name from his. *Indiana* in 1831 gave her instant fame; and she poured out a stream of romances—romances of her own predicament, of which *Lélia* is the most extravagant—a moonstruck allegory of a woman's quest for love and the supernal revelation in unworthy objects. Read *Lélia* and *Consuelo*, and dip into the high fantastic pages of the *Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, and you see how distinct is the break in their writer's life, associated with the agitation of *Les Vesuviennes* and the critical year 1848, and how clear the step forward to the other regions of *La Mare au Diable* and *François le Champi*.

With these two books must be ranged *La Petite Fadette* and *Les Maîtres Sonneurs*. In all four we have that rare achievement, a parcel of human lives set in a true environment and expressed through a divining mind and rare temperament. These out of George Sand's hundred odd volumes have the best chance of keeping her name fresh in the over-burdened memory of the present day and the day still to come. They form her unique contribution to the literature of the nineteenth century that is alive for us and for all time.

E. R.

The following is a list of the works of George Sand:—

In collaboration with Jules Sandeau: Prima Donna (Revue de Paris), 1831; and Rose et Blanche ou la Comédienne et la Religieuse, 1831.

Indiana, 1831; Valentine, 1832; Lélia, 1833; Aldole Rimeur, 1833; Le Secrétaire intime (Collection of Tales), 1834; André, 1834; Lettres d'un voyageur, 1830-36; Leone Leoni, 1834; Jacques, 1834; Mauprat, 1836; Simon, 1836; Les Maîtres Mosaïstes, 1837; La derniere Aldini, 1837; l'Uscoque, 1838; Hiver à Majorque, 1838; Spiridion, 1838; Gabriel, 1839; Les Sept Cordes de la Lyre, 1840; Les Mississipiens, 1840; Pauline, 1840; Horace, 1841; Compagnon du Tour de France, 1841; Consuelo, 1842; Comtesse de Rudolstadt, 1843; Jeanne, 1844; Isidora, 1845; Teverino, 1845; Meunier d'Angibault, 1845; Péché de M. Antoine, 1847; Lucrezia Floriani, 1847; Château des désertes (Suite), 1849; François le Champi, La Mare au Diable, Petite Fadette, 1846-48; Maîtres Sonneurs, 1853; Histoire de ma Vie, 1854; Mont Revêche, 1855; Diable aux champs, 1856; Elle et Lui, 1858; Dames Vertes, Laure, Homme de Neige, 1859; Jean de la Roche, Flaire, 1860; Valvèdre, Tamaris, 1861; Antonia, Famille Germandre, 1861; Beaux Messieurs de Bois-Doré, 1862; Souvenirs et Impressions littéraires, 1862; Mlle. de la Quintinie, 1864; Confession d'une jeune fille, 1865; Monsieur Sylvestre, 1866; Dernier Amour, 1867; Cadio, 1868; Mlle. Merquem, 1868; Pierre qui roule, 1869; Flaire, Daniella, Filleule, Narcisse, Promenades autour d'un village Manon, Amours de l'age d'or, Césarine Dietrich, Journal d'un voyageur pendant la guerre, Mlle. de Cérignan, 1870-74; Impressions et Souvenirs, 1873; Nouvelles lettres d'un Voyageur, 1877; Souvenirs de 1848, 1880; Souvenirs et Idées (posthumous work), 1904.

Among other miscellaneous writings are: Lettres au Peuple, 1848; La Cause du Peuple, 1848; La Guerre, 1859; Garibaldi, 1859; Questions d'art et de Littérature, 1878; Questions politiques et sociales, 1879.

Many smaller tales are also among George Sand's works. Her dramas include Cosima, 1840; Le Roi attend, 1848; Claudie, 1851; Molière, 1851, etc.

WORKS: 24 vols., 1836-40; 16 vols., 1842-44; Dramatic works, 1860, 1877; Letters, 6 vols., 1882-6; Familiar Letters, edited by Montague ((Revue Encyclopédique), 1893; Letters to Musset and Ste. Beuve, 1897; Inedited Letters (D'Heylli, La fille de George Sand), 1900; to Musset, 1904; to Flaubert, 1904.

TRANSLATIONS: Spiridion, 1842; Mosaic Workers and The Orco, E. A. A., 1844; Jacques, A Blackwell, 1847; Consuelo, F. G. Shaw, 1847; F. Robinson, 1851; Oxford Library, 1894, 1895; Countess of Rudolstadt, F. G. Shaw, 1847; F. H. Potter, 1891; The Haunted Marsh (The Enchanted Lake, The Devil's Pool), 1848, 1850, 1861, by J. M. and E. Sedgwick, 1895; The Journeyman Joiner, or the Companion of the Tour de France, 1849; The Little Fadette, with analytical review of the life and writings of the author, J. Mazzini, 1850; J. M. Sedgwick, 1893, 1895; 1863 (Fanchon the Cricket); The Uscoque, a Venetian story, J. Bauer, 1850; Teverino (with biographical sketch), 1855, 1870; Mlle. Merquem, 1868; Antonio, V. Vaughan, 1870; Mauprat, V. Vaughan, 1870, H. E. Miller, 1891; S. Young (A Century of French Romance), 1902; Cesarine Dietrich, E. Stanwood, 1871; The Snow-man, V. Vaughan, 1871; A Rolling Stone, 1871; The Tower of Peramont, 1877; Popular French Novels, 1881; Wings of Courage and the Cloud Spinner, Corkran, 1884; Lady Blake's Love Letters (Lavinia), P. McCarty, 1884; Princess Nourmahal (posthumous novel), L. Vanderpoole, 1888; Francis the Waif, G. Masson, 1889; The Bagpipers, 1890; The Naiad, a ghost story, K. Bevry di Zéréga, 1892; J. M. Sedgwick, 1895; Mosaic Workers, C. C. Johnston, 1895, 1900 (Temple Classics for young people).

WORKS: vols. 1 to 6. M. M. Hays, E. A. Ashurt, E. R. Larken, 1847; 4 vols. (The Countess of Rudolstadt, Miller of Angibault, Mauprat, Little Fadette), 1878.

LETTERS: translated and edited by R. Ledos de Beaufort (with biographical sketch), 1885, 1886.

LIFE, ETC.: B. Thomas (Eminent Women Series), 1883, 1889; E. Caro (Les Grands Ecrivains Français), 1887; J. Amie, George Sand, Mes Souvenirs, 1893; V. Karénine, 3 vols. 1899-1901; F. H. Gribble, George Sand and her Lovers, 1907, 1910; R. Doumic, George Sand. Dix Conférences sur sa vie et son œuvre, 1909; translation, 1910. See also Ste. Beuve, Causeries du Lundi, and Articles on by Matthew Arnold, in Fortnightly Review, June, 1877 (reprinted in Mixed Essays), and in Pall Mall Gazette, August 1884.

CONTENTS

THE DEVIL'S POOL

PAGE
Author's Preface 3
The Author to the Reader 5
I. The Tillage of the Soil 9
II. Father Maurice 17
III. Germain, the Skilled Husbandman 21
IV. Mother Guillette 26
V. Petit-Pierre 31
VI. On the Heath 38
VII. Underneath the Big Oaks 43
VIII. The Evening Prayer 49
IX. Despite the Cold 53
X. Beneath the Stars 60
XI. The Belle of the Village 67
XII. The Master 71
XIII. The Old Woman 77
XIV. The Return to the Farm 83
XV. Mother Maurice 87
XVI. Little Marie 91

APPENDIX

I. A Country Wedding 95
II. The Wedding Favours 102
III. The Wedding 110
IV. The Cabbage 117

FRANÇOIS THE WAIF

Author's Preface 129
Introduction 131

THE DEVIL'S POOL

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When I wrote *The Devil's Pool,* the first of a series of pastoral tales which I meant to bring out together under the title of *Tales of a Hemp-dresser,* I had no system in view, and no design of introducing a revolution into literature. No one man has ever effected a revolution; for a revolution, especially in art, is an unconscious change which everybody has had a hand in. But this is not applicable to tales of rustic life, which have always existed, at all times, and under all forms, and have been sometimes pompous, sometimes affected, and sometimes natural. I have said somewhere, and must now repeat, that pastoral life has always been the ideal of cities and of the courts of kings. I have attempted nothing new in following the easy path which brings back civilised man to the charms of primitive life. I have not tried to invent a new language nor to affect a new style, though many newspaper articles have told me so. I understand my own intentions better than anybody else can, and I am continually surprised that criticism should be so far-seeking, when the simplest ideas and most trivial circumstances are all that inspire the creations of art. Especially as regards *The Devil's Pool,* as I have related in the introduction, an engraving of Holbein, that had struck me, and a real scene that I had before my eyes at the same time, while the men were sowing the crops, were all that induced me to write the modest story laid among the humble landscapes of my daily walks. If I am asked what I meant to do, I shall answer that I meant to write a very touching and very simple story, and that I have not succeeded to my satisfaction. I have indeed seen and felt the beauty of simplicity, but seeing and describing are not the same thing. The best the artist can hope for is to persuade those who have eyes to see for themselves. Look at what is simple, my kind reader; look at the sky, the fields, the trees, and at what is good and true in the peasants; you will catch a glimpse of them in my book, but you will see them much better in nature.

George Sand.

Nohant, *the twelfth of April*, 1851.

THE AUTHOR TO THE READER

A la sueur de ton visaige,
  Tu gagnerois ta pauvre vie.
Après long travail et usaige,
  Voicy la *mort* qui te convie.[1]

This quaint old French verse, written under one of Holbein's pictures, is profoundly melancholy. The engraving represents a labourer driving his plough through the middle of a field. Beyond him stretches a vast horizon, dotted with wretched huts; the sun is sinking behind the hill. It is the end of a hard day's work. The peasant is old, bent, and clothed in rags. He is urging onward a team of four thin and exhausted horses; the ploughshare sinks into a stony and ungrateful soil. One being only is active and alert in this scene of toil and sorrow. It is a fantastic creature. A skeleton armed with a whip, who acts as ploughboy to the old labourer, and running along through the furrow beside the terrified horses, goads them on. This is the spectre Death, whom Holbein has introduced allegorically into that series of religious and philosophic subjects, at once melancholy and grotesque, entitled "The Dance of Death."

In this collection, or rather this mighty composition, where Death, who plays his part on every page, is the connecting link and predominating thought, Holbein has called up kings, popes, lovers, gamesters, drunkards, nuns, courtesans, thieves, warriors, monks, Jews, and travellers—all the people of his time and our own; and everywhere the spectre Death is among them, taunting, threatening, and triumphing. He is absent from one picture only, where Lazarus, lying on a dunghill at the rich man's door, declares that the spectre has no terrors for him; probably because he has nothing to lose, and his existence is already a life in death.

---

[1] In toil and sorrow thou shalt eat
  The bitter bread of poverty.
After the burden and the heat,
  Lo! it is Death who calls for thee.

Is there comfort in this stoical thought of the half-pagan Christianity of the Renaissance, and does it satisfy religious souls? The upstart, the rogue, the tyrant, the rake, and all those haughty sinners who make an ill use of life, and whose steps are dogged by Death, will be surely punished; but can the reflection that death is no evil make amends for the long hardships of the blind man, the beggar, the madman, and the poor peasant? No! An inexorable sadness, an appalling fatality brood over the artist's work. It is like a bitter curse, hurled against the fate of humanity.

Holbein's faithful delineation of the society in which he lived is, indeed, painful satire. His attention was engrossed by crime and calamity; but what shall we, who are artists of a later date, portray? Shall we look to find the reward of the human beings of to-day in the contemplation of death, and shall we invoke it as the penalty of unrighteousness and the compensation of suffering?

No, henceforth, our business is not with death, but with life. We believe no longer in the nothingness of the grave, nor in safety bought with the price of a forced renunciation; life must be enjoyed in order to be fruitful. Lazarus must leave his dunghill, so that the poor need no longer exult in the death of the rich. All must be made happy, that the good fortune of a few may not be a crime and a curse. As the labourer sows his wheat, he must know that he is helping forward the work of life, instead of rejoicing that Death walks at his side. We may no longer consider death as the chastisement of prosperity or the consolation of distress, for God has decreed it neither as the punishment nor the compensation of life. Life has been blessed by Him, and it is no longer permissible for us to leave the grave as the only refuge for those whom we are unwilling to make happy.

There are some artists of our own day, who, after a serious survey of their surroundings, take pleasure in painting misery, the sordidness of poverty, and the dunghill of Lazarus. This may belong to the domain of art and philosophy; but by depicting poverty as so hideous, so degraded, and sometimes so vicious and criminal, do they gain their end, and is that end as salutary as they would wish? We dare not pronounce judgment. They may answer that they terrify the unjust rich man by pointing out to him the yawning pit that lies beneath the frail covering of wealth; just as in the time of the Dance of Death, they showed him his gaping grave, and Death standing ready to fold him in an impure embrace. Now, they show him the thief breaking open his doors, and the murderer stealthily watching his sleep. We confess we cannot understand how we can reconcile him to the human nature he despises, or make him sensible of the sufferings of the poor wretch whom he dreads, by showing him this wretch in the guise of the escaped convict or the nocturnal burglar. The hideous phantom Death, under the repulsive aspect in which he has been represented by Holbein and his predecessors, gnashing his teeth and playing the fiddle, has been powerless to convert the wicked and console their victims. And does not our literature employ the same means as the artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?

The revellers of Holbein fill their glasses in a frenzy to dispel the idea of Death, who is their cup-bearer, though they do not see him. The unjust rich of our own day demand cannon and barricades to drive out the idea of an insurrection of the people which Art shows them as slowly working in the dark, getting ready to burst upon the State. The Church of the Middle Ages met the terrors of the great of the earth with the sale of indulgences. The government of to-day soothes the uneasiness of the rich by exacting from them large sums for the support of policemen, jailers, bayonets, and prisons.

Albert Dürer, Michael Angelo, Holbein, Callot, and Goya have made powerful satires on the evils of their times and countries, and their immortal works are historical documents of unquestionable value. We shall not refuse to artists the right to probe the wounds of society and lay them bare to our eyes; but is the only function of art still to threaten and appal? In the literature of the mysteries of iniquity, which talent and imagination have brought into fashion, we prefer the sweet and gentle characters which can attempt and effect conversions, to the melodramatic villains who inspire terror; for terror never cures selfishness, but increases it.

We believe that the mission of art is a mission of sentiment and love, that the novel of to-day should take the place of the parable and the fable of early times, and that the artist has a larger and more poetic task than that of suggesting certain prudential and conciliatory measures for the purpose of diminishing the fright caused by his pictures. His aim should be to render attractive the objects he has at heart, and, if necessary, I have no objection to his embellishing them a little. Art is not the study of positive reality, but the search for ideal truth, and the *Vicar of Wakefield* was a more useful and healthy book than the *Paysan Perverti* or the *Liaisons Dangereuses*.

Forgive these reflections of mine, kind reader, and let them stand as a preface, for there will be no other to the little story I am going to relate to you. My tale is to be so short and so simple, that I felt obliged to make you my apologies for it beforehand, by telling you what I think of the literature of terror.

I have allowed myself to be drawn into this disgression for the sake of a labourer; and it is the story of a labourer which I have been meaning to tell you, and which I shall now tell you at once.

THE DEVIL'S POOL

I

THE TILLAGE OF THE SOIL

I HAD just been looking long and sadly at Holbein's ploughman, and was walking through the fields, musing on rustic life and the destiny of the husbandman. It is certainly tragic for him to spend his days and his strength delving in the jealous earth, that so reluctantly yields up her rich treasures when a morsel of coarse black bread, at the end of the day's work, is the sole reward and profit to be reaped from such arduous toil. The wealth of the soil, the harvests, the fruits, the splendid cattle that grow sleek and fat in the luxuriant grass, are the property of the few, and but instruments of the drudgery and slavery of the many. The man of leisure seldom loves, for their own sake, the fields and meadows, the landscape, or the noble animals which are to be converted into gold for his use. He comes to the country for his health or for change of air, but goes back to town to spend the fruit of his vassal's labour.

On the other hand, the peasant is too abject, too wretched, and too fearful of the future to enjoy the beauty of the country and the charms of pastoral life. To him, also, the yellow harvest-fields, the rich meadows, the fine cattle represent bags of gold; but he knows that only an infinitesimal part of their contents, insufficient for his daily needs, will ever fall to his share. Yet year by year he must fill those accursed bags, to please his master and buy the right of living on his land in sordid wretchedness.

Marin County Free Library
Civic Center Administration Building

Yet nature is eternally young, beautiful, and generous. She pours forth poetry and beauty on all creatures and all plants that are allowed free development. She owns the secret of happiness, of which no one has ever robbed her. The happiest of men would be he who, knowing the full meaning of his labour, should, while working with his hands, find his happiness and his freedom in the exercise of his intelligence, and, having his heart in unison with his brain, should at once understand his own work and love that of God. The artist has such delights as these in contemplating and reproducing the beauties of nature; but if his heart be true and tender, his pleasure is disturbed when he sees the miseries of the men who people this paradise of earth. True happiness will be theirs when mind, heart, and hand shall work in concert in the sight of Heaven, and there shall be a sacred harmony between God's goodness and the joys of his creatures. Then, instead of the pitiable and frightful figure of Death stalking, whip in hand, across the fields, the painter of allegories may place beside the peasant a radiant angel, sowing the blessed grain broadcast in the smoking furrow.

The dream of a serene, free, poetic, laborious, and simple life for the tiller of the soil is not so impossible that we should banish it as a chimera. The sweet, sad words of Virgil: "Oh, happy the peasants of the field, if they knew their own blessings!" is a regret, but, like all regrets, it is also a prophecy. The day will come when the labourer too may be an artist, and may at least feel what is beautiful, if he cannot express it—a matter of far less importance. Do not we know that this mysterious poetic intuition is already his, in the form of instinct and vague reverie? Among those peasants who possess some of the comforts of life, and whose moral and intellectual development is not entirely stifled by extreme wretchedness, pure happiness that can be felt and appreciated exists in the elementary stage; and, moreover, since poets have already raised their voices out of the lap of pain and of weariness, why should we say that the labour of the hands excludes the working of the soul? Without doubt this exclusion is the common result of excessive toil and of deep misery; but let it not be said that when men shall work moderately and usefully there will be nothing but bad workers and bad poets. The man who draws in noble joy from the poetic feeling is a true poet, though he has never written a verse all his life.

My thoughts had flown in this direction, without my perceiving that my confidence in the capacity of man for education was strengthened by external influences. I was walking along the edge of a field, which some peasants were preparing to sow. The space was vast as that in Holbein's picture; the landscape, too, was vast and framed in a great sweep of green, slightly reddened by the approach of autumn. Here and there in the great russet field, slender rivulets of water left in the furrows by the late rains sparkled in the sunlight like silver threads. The day was clear and mild, and the soil, freshly cleft by the ploughshare, sent up a light steam. At the other extremity of the field, an old man, whose broad shoulders and stern face recalled Holbein's ploughman, but whose clothes carried no suggestion of poverty, was gravely driving his plough of antique shape, drawn by two placid oxen, true patriarchs of the meadow, tall and rather thin, with pale yellow coats and long, drooping horns. They were those old workers who, through long habit, have grown to be *brothers*, as they are called in our country, and who, when one loses the other, refuse to work with a new comrade, and pine away with grief. People who are unfamiliar with the country call the love of the ox for his yoke-fellow a fable. Let them come and see in the corner of the stable one of these poor beasts, thin and wasted, restlessly lashing his lean flanks with his tail, violently breathing with mingled terror and disdain on the food offered him, his eyes always turned toward the door, scratching with his hoof the empty place at his side, sniffing the yokes and chains which his fellow used to wear, and incessantly calling him with melancholy lowings. The ox-herd will say: " There is a pair of oxen gone; this one will work no more, for his brother is dead. We ought to fatten him for the market, but he will not eat, and will soon starve himself to death."

The old labourer worked slowly, silently, and without waste of effort. His docile team were in no greater haste than he; but, thanks to the undistracted steadiness of his toil and the judicious expenditure of his strength, his furrow was as soon ploughed as that of his son, who was driving, at some distance from him, four less vigorous oxen through a more stubborn and stony piece of ground.

My attention was next caught by a fine spectacle, a truly noble subject for a painter. At the other end of the field a fine-looking youth was driving a magnificent team of four pairs of young oxen, through whose sombre coats glanced a ruddy, glow-like flame. They had the short, curly heads that belong to the wild bull, the same large, fierce eyes and jerky movements; they worked in an abrupt, nervous way that showed how they still rebelled against the yoke and goad, and trembled with anger as they obeyed the authority so recently imposed. They were what is called " newly yoked " oxen. The man who drove them had to clear a corner of the field that had formerly been given up to pasture, and was filled with old tree-stumps; and his youth and energy, and his eight half-broken animals, hardly sufficed for the Herculean task.

A child of six or seven years old, lovely as an angel, wearing round his shoulders, over his blouse, a sheepskin that made him look like a little Saint John the Baptist out of a Renaissance picture, was running along in the furrow beside the plough, pricking the flanks of the oxen with a long, light goad but slightly sharpened. The spirited animals quivered under the child's light touch, making their yokes and head-bands creak, and shaking the pole violently.

Whenever a root stopped the advance of the ploughshare, the labourer would call every animal by name in his powerful voice, trying to calm rather than to excite them; for the oxen, irritated by the sudden resistance, bounded, pawed the ground with their great cloven hoofs, and would have jumped aside and dragged the plough across the fields, if the young man had not kept the first four in order with his voice and goad, while the child controlled the four others. The little fellow shouted too, but the voice which he tried to make of terrible effect, was as sweet as his angelic face. The whole scene was beautiful in its grace and strength; the landscape, the man, the child, the oxen under the yoke; and in spite of the mighty struggle by which the earth was subdued, a deep feeling of peace and sweetness reigned over all. Each time that an obstacle was surmounted and the plough resumed its even, solemn progress, the labourer, whose pretended violence was but a trial of his strength, and an outlet for his energy, instantly regained that serenity which is the right of simple souls, and looked with fatherly pleasure toward his child, who turned to smile back at him. Then the young father would raise his manly voice in the solemn and melancholy chant that ancient tradition transmits, not indeed to all ploughmen indiscriminately, but to those who are most perfect in the art of exciting and sustaining the spirit of cattle while at work. This song, which was probably sacred in its origin, and to which mysterious influences must once have been attributed, is still thought to possess the virtue of putting animals on their mettle, allaying their irritation, and of beguiling the weariness of their long, hard toil. It is not enough to guide them skilfully, to trace a perfectly straight furrow, and to lighten their labour by raising the ploughshare or driving it into the earth; no man can be a consummate husbandman who does not know how to sing to his oxen, and that is an art that requires taste and especial gifts.

To tell the truth, this chant is only a recitative, broken off and taken up at pleasure. Its irregular form and its intonations that violate all the rules of musical art make it impossible to describe.

But it is none the less a noble song, and so appropriate is it to the nature of the work it accompanies, to the gait of the oxen, to the peace of the fields, and to the simplicity of the men who sing it, that no genius unfamiliar with the tillage of the earth, and no man except an accomplished labourer of our part of the country, could repeat it. At the season of the year when there is no work or stir afoot except that of the ploughman, this strong, sweet refrain rises like the voice of the breeze, to which the key it is sung in gives it some resemblance. Each phrase ends with a long trill, the final note of which is held with incredible strength of breath, and rises a quarter of a tone, sharping systematically. It is barbaric, but possesses an unspeakable charm, and anybody, once accustomed to hear it, cannot conceive of another song taking its place at the same hour and in the same place, without striking a discord.

So it was that I had before my eyes a picture the reverse of that of Holbein, although the scene was similar. Instead of a wretched old man, a young and active one; instead of a team of weary and emaciated horses, four yoke of robust and fiery oxen; instead of death, a beautiful child; instead of despair and destruction, energy and the possibility of happiness.

Then the old French verse, "A la sueur de ton visaige," etc., and Virgil's "O fortunatos . . . agricolas," returned to my mind, and seeing this lovely child and his father, under such poetic conditions, and with so much grace and strength, accomplish a task full of such grand and solemn suggestions, I was conscious of deep pity and involuntary respect. Happy the peasant of the fields! Yes, and so too should I be in his place, if my arm and voice could be endowed with sudden strength, and I could help to make Nature fruitful, and sing of her gifts, without ceasing to see with my eyes or understand with my brain harmonious colours and sounds, delicate shades and graceful outlines; in short, the mysterious beauty of all things. And above all, if my heart continued to beat in concert with the divine sentiment that presided over the immortal sublimity of creation.

But, alas! this man has never understood the mystery of beauty; this child will never understand it. God forbid that I should not think them superior to the animals which are subject to them, or that they have not moments of rapturous insight that soothe their toil and lull their cares to sleep. I see the seal of the Lord upon their noble brows, for they were born to inherit the earth far more truly than those who have bought and paid for it. The proof that they feel this is that they cannot be exiled with impunity, that they love the soil they have watered with their tears, and that the true peasant dies of homesickness under the arms of a soldier far from his native field. But he lacks some of my enjoyments, those pure delights which should be his by right, as a workman in that immense temple which the sky only is vast enough to embrace. He lacks the consciousness of his sentiment. Those who condemned him to slavery from his mother's womb, being unable to rob him of his vague dreams, took away from him the power of reflection.

Yet, imperfect being that he is, sentenced to eternal childhood, he is nobler than the man in whom knowledge has stifled feeling. Do not set yourselves above him, you who believe yourselves invested with a lawful and inalienable right to rule over him, for your terrible mistake shows that your brain has destroyed your heart, and that you are the blindest and most incomplete of men! I love the simplicity of his soul more than the false lights of yours; and if I had to narrate the story of his life, the pleasure I should take in bringing out the tender and touching side of it would be greater than your merit in painting the degradation and contempt into which he is cast by your social code.

3393

I knew the young man and the beautiful child; I knew their history, for they had a history. Everybody has his own, and could make the romance of his life interesting, if he could but understand it. Although but a peasant and a labourer, Germain had always been aware of his duties and affections. He had related them to me clearly and ingenuously, and I had listened with interest. After some time spent in watching him plough, it occurred to me that I might write his story, though that story were as simple, as straightforward, and unadorned as the furrow he was tracing.

Next year that furrow will be filled and covered by a fresh one. Thus disappear most of the footprints made by man in the field of human life. A little earth obliterates them, and the furrows we have dug succeed one another like graves in a cemetery. Is not the furrow of the labourer of as much value as that of the idler, even if that idler, by some absurd chance, have made a little noise in the world, and left behind him an abiding name?

I mean, if possible, to save from oblivion the furrow of Germain, the skilled husbandman. He will never know nor care, but I shall take pleasure in my task.

II

FATHER MAURICE

"GERMAIN," said his father-in-law one day, "you must decide about marrying again. It is almost two years now since you lost my daughter, and your eldest boy is seven years old. You are almost thirty, my boy, and you know that in our country a man is considered too old to go to housekeeping again after that age; you have three nice children, and thus far they have not proved a burden to us at all. My wife and my daughter-in-law have looked after them as well as they could, and loved them as they ought. Here is Petit-Pierre almost grown up. He goads the oxen very well; he knows how to look after the cattle; and he is strong enough to drive the horses to the trough. So it is not he that worries us. But the other two, love them though we do, God knows the poor little innocents give us trouble enough this year; my daughter-in-law is about to lie in, and she has yet another baby to attend to. When the child we are expecting comes, she will not be able to look after your little Solange, and above all your Sylvain, who is not four years old, and who is never quiet day or night. He has a restless disposition like yours; that will make a good workman of him, but it makes a dreadful child, and my old wife cannot run fast enough to save him when he almost tumbles into the ditch, or when he throws himself in front of the tramping cattle. And then with this other that my daughter-in-law is going to bring into the world, for a month at least her next older child will fall on my wife's hands. Besides, your children worry us, and give us too much to do; we hate to see children badly looked after.

and when we think of the accidents that may befall them, for want of care, we cannot rest. So you need another wife, and I another daughter-in-law. Think this over, my son. I have called it to your mind before. Time flies, and the years will not wait a moment for you. It is your duty to your children and to the rest of us, who wish all well at home, to marry as soon as you can."

"Very well, father," answered the son-in-law, "if you really wish it, I must do as you say. But I do not wish to hide it from you that it will make me very sad, and that I hardly wish for anything but to drown myself. We know who it is we lose, we never know whom we find. I had a good wife, a pretty wife, sweet, brave, good to her father and mother, good to her husband, good to her children, good to toil in the fields and in the house, well fitted to work—in short, good for everything; and when you had given her to me, and I took her, we did not place it among our promises that I should go and forget about her if I had the misfortune to lose her."

"What you say shows your good heart, Germain," answered Father Maurice. "I know that you loved my daughter and that you made her happy, and that had you been able to satisfy Death by going in her place, Catherine would be alive to-day, and you would be in the graveyard. She deserved all your love, and if you are not consoled, neither are we. But I do not speak to you of forgetting her. God wished her to leave us, and we do not let a day go by without telling Him in our prayers and thoughts, and words and actions, that we keep her memory and still sorrow for her loss. But if she could speak to you from the other world, and let you know what she wishes, she would tell you to find a mother for her little orphans. So the question is to find a woman who will be worthy to take her place. It will not be easy, but it is not impossible. And when we shall find her for you, you will love her as you used to love my daughter, because you are a good man, and because you will be thankful to her for helping us and for loving your children."

"Very well, Father Maurice, I shall do as you wish, as I have always done."

"It is only justice, my son, to say that you have always listened to the friendly advice and good judgment of the head of the house. So let us consult about your choice of a new wife. First, I don't advise you to take a young girl. That is not what you need. Youth is careless, and, as it is hard work to bring up three children, especially when they are of another bed, you must have a good soul, wise and gentle, and well used to work. If your wife is not about the same age as you, she will have no reason to accept such a duty. She will find you too old and your children too young. She will be complaining, and your children will suffer."

"This is just what makes me uneasy. Suppose the poor little things should be badly treated, hated, beaten?"

"God grant not," answered the old man. "But bad women are more rare with us than good, and we shall be stupid if we cannot pick out somebody who will suit us."

"That is true, father. There are good girls in our village. There is Louise, Sylvaine, Claudie, Marguerite—yes, anybody you want."

"Gently, gently, my boy. All these girls are too young, or too poor, or too pretty; for surely we must think of that too, my son. A pretty woman is not always as well behaved as another!"

"Then you wish me to take an ugly wife?" said Germain, a little uneasy.

"No, not ugly at all, for this woman will bear you other children, and there is nothing more miserable than to have children who are ugly and weak and sickly. But a woman still fresh and in good health, who is neither pretty nor ugly, would suit you exactly."

"I am quite sure," said Germain, smiling rather sadly, "that to get such a woman as you wish, you must have her made to order. All the more because you don't wish her to be poor, and the rich are not easy to get, particularly for a widower."

"And suppose she were a widow herself, Germain? A widow without children and with a good portion?"

"For the moment, I cannot think of anybody like this in our parish."

"Nor I either. But there are others elsewhere."

"You have somebody in mind, father. Then tell me, at once, who it is."

III

GERMAIN, THE SKILLED HUSBANDMAN

"YES, I have somebody in mind," replied Father Maurice. "It is a Leonard, the widow of a Guérin. She lives at Fourche."

"I know neither the woman nor the place," answered Germain, resigned, but growing more and more melancholy.

"Her name is Catherine, like your dead wife's."

"Catherine? Yes, I shall be glad to have to pronounce that name, Catherine; and yet if I cannot love one as much as the other, it will pain me all the more. It will bring her to my mind more often."

"I tell you, you will love her. She is a good soul, a woman with a warm heart. I have not seen her for a long time. She was not an ugly girl then. But she is no longer young. She is thirty-two. She comes of a good family, honest people all of them, and for property she has eight or ten thousand francs in land which she would sell gladly in order to invest in the place where she settles. For she, too, is thinking of marrying again, and I know that if your character pleases her, she will not be dissatisfied with your situation."

"So you have made all the arrangements?"

"Yes, except that I have not had an opinion from either of you, and that is what you must ask each other when you meet. The woman's father is a distant connection of mine, and he has been a good friend to me. You know Father Leonard well?"

"Yes, I have seen you two talking at the market, and at the last you lunched together. Then it was about her that he spoke to you so long? "

" Certainly. He watched you selling your cattle and saw that you drove a shrewd bargain, and that you were a good-looking fellow and appeared active and intelligent; and when I told him what a good fellow you were and how well you have behaved toward us, without one word of vexation or anger during the eight years we have been living and working together, he took it into his head to marry you to his daughter. This suits me, too, I admit, when I think of her good reputation and the honesty of her family and the prosperous condition I know her affairs are in."

" I see, Father Maurice, that you have an eye to money."

" Of course I do; you have, too, have you not? "

" I do look toward it, if you wish, for your sake; but you know that, for my own part, I don't worry whether I gain or not in what we make. I don't understand about profit-sharing; I have no head for that sort of thing. I understand the ground; I understand cattle, horses, carts, sowing, threshing, and provender. As for sheep, and vineyards, and vegetables, petty profits, and fine gardening, you know that is your son's business. I don't have much to do with it. As to money, my memory is short, and I should rather give up everything than fight about what is yours and what is mine. I should be afraid of making some mistake and claiming what does not belong to me, and if business were not so clear and simple I should never find my way in it."

" So much the worse, my son; and this is the reason I wish you to have a wife with a clear head to fill my place when I am gone. You never wished to understand our accounts, and this might lead you into a quarrel with my son, when you don't have me any longer to keep you in harmony and decide what is each one's share."

" May you live long, Father Maurice. But do not worry about what will happen when you die. I shall never quarrel with your son. I trust Jacques as I do you; and as I have no property of my own, and all that might accrue to me comes from your daughter and belongs to our children, I can rest easy, and you, too. Jacques would never rob his sister's children for the sake of his own, for he loves them all equally."

"You are right, Germain. Jacques is a good son, a good brother, and a man who loves the truth. But Jacques may die before you, before your children grow up; and in a family we must always remember never to leave children without a head to look after them and govern their disagreements; otherwise, the lawyer-people mix themselves up in it, stir them up to fight, and make them eat up everything in lawsuits. So we ought not to think of bringing home another person, man or woman, without remembering that some day or other that person may have to control the behaviour and business of twenty or thirty children and grandchildren, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law. We never know how big a family can grow, and when a hive is so full that the bees must form new swarms, each one wishes to carry off her share of the honey. When I took you for my son, although my daughter was rich and you were poor, I never reproached her for choosing you. I saw that you were a hard worker, and I knew very well that the best fortune for people in such a country as ours is a pair of arms and a heart like yours. When a man brings these into a family, he brings enough. But with a woman it is different. Her work indoors saves, but it does not gain. Besides, now that you are a father, looking for a second wife, you must remember that your new children will have no claim on the property of your children by another wife; and if you should happen to die they might suffer very much—at least, if your wife had no money in her own right. And then the children which you will add to our colony will cost something to bring up. If that fell on us alone, we should surely take care of them without a word of complaint; but the comfort of everybody would suffer, and your eldest children would bear their share of hardship. When families grow too large, if money does not keep pace, misery comes, no matter how bravely you bear up. This is what I wished to say, Germain; think it over, and try to make the widow Guérin like you; for her discretion and her dollars will help us now and make us feel easy about the future."

"That is true, Father. I shall try to please her and to like her."

"To do that you must go to find her, and see her."

"At her own place? At Fourche? That is a great way from here, is it not? And we scarcely have time to run off at this season of the year."

"When it is a question of a love-match you must make up your mind to lose time, but when it is a sensible marriage of two people, who take no sudden fancies and know what they want, it is very soon decided. To-morrow is Saturday; you will make your day's work a little shorter than usual. You must start after dinner about two o'clock. You will be at Fourche by nightfall. The moon rises early. The roads are good, and it is not more than three leagues distant. It is near Magnier. Besides, you will take the mare."

"I had just as lief go afoot in this cool weather."

"Yes, but the mare is pretty, and a suitor looks better when he comes well mounted. You must put on your new clothes and carry a nice present of game to Father Leonard. You will come from me and talk with him, pass all of Sunday with his daughter, and come back Monday morning with a yes or no."

"Very well," answered Germain calmly, and yet he did not feel very calm.

Germain had always lived soberly, as industrious peasants do. Married at twenty, he had loved but one woman in his life, and after her death, impulsive and gay as his nature was, he had never played nor trifled with another. He had borne a real sorrow faithfully in his heart, and it was not without misgiving nor without sadness that he yielded to his father-in-law; but that father had always governed the family wisely and Germain, entirely devoted as he was to the common welfare, and so, by consequence, to the head of the house, who represented it, could not understand that he might have wronged his own good sense and hurt the interests of all.

Nevertheless, he was sad. Few days went by when he did not cry in secret, for his wife, and although loneliness began to weigh on him, he was more afraid of entering into a new marriage than desirous of finding a support in his sorrow. He had a vague idea that love might have consoled him by coming to him of a sudden, for this is the only way love can console. We never find it when we seek it; it comes over us unawares.

This cold-blooded scheme of marriage that Father Maurice had opened to him, this unknown woman he was to take for his bride, perhaps even all that had been said to him of her virtue and good sense, made him pause to think. And he went away musing as men do whose thoughts are too few to divide into hostile factions, not scraping up fine arguments for rebellion and selfishness, but suffering from a dull grief, submissive to ills from which there is no escape.

Meanwhile, Father Maurice had returned to the farm, while Germain, between sunset and dark, spent the closing hour of the day in repairing gaps the sheep had made in the hedge of a yard near the farm-buildings. He lifted up the branches of the thorn-bushes and held them in place with clods of earth, whilst the thrushes chattered in the neighbouring thicket and seemed to call to him to hurry, for they were eager to come and see his work as soon as he had gone.

IV

MOTHER GUILLETTE

FATHER MAURICE found at his house an old neighbour who had come to talk with his wife, seeking at the same time to secure a few embers to light her fire. Mother Guillette lived in a wretched hut two gunshots away from the farm. Still she was a willing and an orderly woman. Her poor dwelling was clean and neat, and the care with which her clothes were mended showed that she respected herself in the midst of her penury.

"You have come to fetch your evening fire, Mother Guillette," said the old man to her. "Is there anything else you want?"

"No, Father Maurice," answered she; "nothing for the present. I am no beggar, as you know, and I take care not to abuse the kindness of my friends."

"That is very true. Besides, your friends are always ready to do you a service."

"I was just talking to your wife, and I was asking her if Germain had finally decided to marry again."

"You are no gossip," replied Father Maurice; "we can talk in your presence without having any foolish talebearing to fear. So I will tell my wife and you that Germain has made up his mind absolutely. To-morrow morning he starts for the farm at Fourche."

"Good enough!" cried Mother Maurice; "poor child! God grant he may find a woman as good and true as he."

"So he is going to Fourche?" remarked Mother Guillette; "how lucky that is! It is exactly what I want. And since you were just asking me if there were anything I wished for, I am going to tell you, Father Maurice, how you can do me a service."

"Tell me what it is; we like to help you."

"I wish Germain would be so kind as to take my daughter along with him."

"Where? To Fourche?"

"No, not to Fourche, but to Ormeaux. She is to stay there the rest of the year."

"What!" exclaimed Mother Maurice, "are you going to separate from your daughter?"

"She must go out to work and earn her living. I am sorry enough, and she is too, poor soul. We could not make up our minds to part Saint John's Day, but now that Saint Martin's is upon us, she finds a good place as shepherdess at the farms at Ormeaux. On his way home from the fair the other day, the farmer passed by here. He caught sight of my little Marie tending her three sheep on the common.

"'You have hardly enough to do, my little girl,' said he; 'three sheep are not enough for a shepherdess: would you like to take care of a hundred? I will take you along. Our shepherdess has fallen sick. She is going back to her family, and if you will be at our farm before a week is over, you shall have fifty francs for the rest of the year up to Saint John's Day.'

"The child refused, but she could not help thinking it over and telling me about it, when she came home in the evening, and found me downhearted and worried about the winter, which was sure to be hard and long; for this year the cranes and wild ducks were seen crossing the sky a whole month before they generally do. We both of us cried, but after a time we took heart. We knew that we could not stay together, since it is hard enough for one person to get a living from our little patch of ground. Then since Marie is old enough—for she is going on to sixteen—she must do like the rest, earn her own living and help her poor mother."

"Mother Guillette," said the old labourer, "if it were only fifty francs you needed to help you out of your trouble, and save you from sending away your daughter, I should certainly find them for you, although fifty francs is no trifle for people like us. But in everything we must consult common sense as well as friendship. To be saved from want this year will not keep you from want in the future, and the longer your daughter takes to make up her mind, the harder you both will find it to part. Little Marie is growing tall and strong. She has not enough at home to keep her busy. She might get into lazy habits——"

"Oh, I am not afraid of that!" exclaimed Mother Guillette. "Marie is as active as a rich girl at the head of a large family can be. She never sits still with her arms folded for an instant, and when we have no work to do, she keeps dusting and polishing our old furniture until it shines like a mirror. The child is worth her weight in gold, and I should much rather have her enter your service as a shepherdess than go so far away to people I don't know. You would have taken her at Saint John's Day; but now you have hired all your hands, and we cannot think of that till Saint John's Day next year."

"Yes, I consent with all my heart, Guillette. I shall be very glad to take her. But in the meantime she will do well to learn her work, and accustom herself to obey others."

"Yes, that is true, do doubt. The die is cast. The farmer at Ormeaux sent to ask about her this morning; we consented, and she must go. But the poor child does not know the way, and I should not like to send her so far alone. Since your son-in-law goes to Fourche to-morrow, perhaps he can take her. It seems that Fourche is close to her journey's end. At least, so they tell me, for I have never made the trip myself."

"It is very near indeed, and my son will show her the way. Naturally, he might even take her up behind him on the mare. That will save her shoes. Here he comes for supper. Tell me, Germain, Mother Guillette's little Marie is going to become a shepherdess at Ormeaux. Will you take her there on your horse?"

"Certainly," answered Germain, who, troubled as he was, never felt indisposed to do a kindness to his neighbour.

In our community a mother would not think of such a thing as to trust a girl of sixteen to a man of twenty-eight. For Germain was really but twenty-eight, and although according to the notions of the country people he was considered rather old to marry, he was still the best-looking man in the neighbourhood. Toil had not wrinkled and worn him as it does most peasants who have passed ten years in tilling the soil. He was strong enough to labour for ten more years without showing signs of age, and the prejudices of her time must have weighed heavily on the mind of a young girl to prevent her from seeing that Germain had a fresh complexion, eyes sparkling and blue as skies in May, ruddy lips, fine teeth, and a body well shaped and lithe as a young horse that has never yet left his pasture.

But purity of manners is a sacred custom in some districts far distant from the corrupted life of great cities, and amongst all the households of Belair, the family of Maurice was known to be honest and truth-loving. Germain was on his way to find a wife. Marie was a child, too young and too poor to be thought of in this light, and unless he were a heartless and a bad man he could not entertain one evil thought concerning her. Father Maurice felt no uneasiness at seeing him take the pretty girl on the crupper. Mother Guillette would have thought herself doing him a wrong had she asked him to respect her daughter as his sister.

Marie embraced her mother and her young friends twenty times, and then mounted the mare in tears. Germain, sad on his own account, felt all the more sympathy for her sorrow, and rode away with a melancholy air, while all the people of the neighbourhood waved good-bye to Marie without a thought of harm.

V

PETIT-PIERRE

The grey was young, good-looking, and strong. She carried her double burden with ease, laying back her ears and champing her bit like the high-spirited mare she was. Passing in front of the pasture, she caught sight of her mother, whose name was the Old Grey as hers was the Young Grey, and she whinnied in token of good-bye. The Old Grey came nearer the hedge, and striking her shoes together she tried to gallop along the edge of the field in order to follow her daughter; then seeing her fall into a sharp trot, the mare whinnied in her turn and stood in an uneasy attitude, her nose in the air and her mouth filled with grass that she had no thought of eating.

"That poor beast always knows her offspring," said Germain, trying to keep Marie's thoughts from her troubles. "That reminds me, I never kissed Petit-Pierre before I started. The naughty boy was not there. Last night he wished to make me promise to take him along, and he wept for an hour in bed. This morning again, he tried everything to persuade me. Oh, how sly and coaxing he is! But when he saw that he could not gain his point, the young gentleman got into a temper. He went off to the fields, and I have not seen him all day."

"I have seen him," said little Marie, striving to keep back her tears; "he was running toward the clearing with Soulas' children, and I felt sure that he had been away from home a long time, for he was hungry and was eating wild plums and blackberries. I gave him the bread I had for lunch, and he said, 'Thank you, dear Marie; when you come to our house, I will give you some cake.' He is a dear little child, Germain."

"Yes, he is," answered the labourer; "and there is nothing I would not do for him. If his grandmother had not more sense than I, I could not have helped taking him with me, when I saw him crying as though his little heart would burst."

"Then why did you not take him, Germain? He would have been very little trouble. He is so good when you please him."

"He would probably have been in the way in the place where I am going. At least Father Maurice thought so. On the other hand, I should have thought it well to see how they received him. For no one could help being kind to such a nice child. But at home they said that I must not begin by showing off all the cares of the household. I don't know why I speak of this to you, little Marie; you can't understand."

"Oh, yes, I do; I know that you are going away to marry; my mother spoke to me about it, and told me not to mention it to a soul, either at home or at my destination, and you need not be afraid; I shall not breathe a word about it."

"You are very right. For the deed isn't done yet. Perhaps I shall not suit this woman."

"I hope you will, Germain; why should you not suit her?"

"Who knows? I have three children, and that is a heavy burden for a woman who is not their mother."

"Very true. But are not your children like other children?"

"Do you think so?"

"They are lovely as little angels, and so well brought up that you can't find better children."

"There's Sylvain. He is none too obedient."

"He is so very little. He can't help being naughty. But he is very bright."

"He is bright, it is true, and very brave. He is not afraid of cows nor bulls, and if he were given his own way, he would be climbing on horseback already with his elder brother."

"Had I been in your place, I would have taken the eldest boy along. Surely people would have liked you at once for having such a pretty child."

"Yes, if a woman is fond of children. But if she is not."

"Are there women who don't love children?"

"Not many, I think, but still there are some, and that is what troubles me."

"You don't know this woman at all, then?"

"No more than you, and I fear that I shall not know her better after I have seen her. I am not suspicious. When people say nice things to me, I believe them, but more than once I have had good reason to repent, for words are not deeds."

"They say that she is a very good woman."

"Who says so? Father Maurice?"

"Yes, your father-in-law."

"That is all very well. But he knows her no more than I."

"Well, you will soon see. Pay close attention, and let us hope that you will not be deceived."

"I have it. Little Marie, I should be very much obliged if you would come into the house for a minute before you go straight on to Ormeaux. You are quick-witted; you have always shown that you are not stupid, and nothing escapes your notice. Should you see anything to rouse your suspicions, you must warn me of it very quietly."

"Oh! no, Germain, I will not do that; I should be too much afraid of making a mistake; and, besides, if a word lightly spoken were to turn you against this marriage, your family would bear me a grudge, and I have plenty of troubles now without bringing any more on my poor dear mother."

As they were talking thus, the grey pricked up her ears and shied; then returning on her steps, she approached the bushes, where she began to recognise something which had frightened her at first. Germain cast his eye over the thicket, and in a ditch, beneath the branches of a scrub-oak, still thick and green, he saw something which he took for a lamb.

"The little creature is strayed or dead, for it does not move. Perhaps some one is looking for it; we must see."

"It is not an animal," cried little Marie; "it is a sleeping child. It is your Petit-Pierre."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Germain; "see the little scamp asleep so far away from home, and in a ditch where a snake might bite him!"

He lifted up the child, who smiled as he opened his eyes and threw his arms about his father's neck, saying: "Dear little father, you are going to take me with you."

"Oh, yes; always the same tune. What were you doing there, you naughty Pierre?"

"I was waiting for my little father to go by. I was watching the road, and I watched so hard that I fell asleep."

"And if I had passed by without seeing you, you would have been out of doors all night, and a wolf would have eaten you up."

"Oh, I knew very well that you would see me," answered Petit-Pierre, confidently.

"Well, kiss me now, bid me good-bye, and run back quickly to the house, unless you wish them to have supper without you."

"Are you not going to take me, then?" cried the little boy, beginning to rub his eyes to show that he was thinking of tears.

"You know very well that grandpapa and grandmamma do not wish it," said Germain, fortifying himself behind the authority of his elders, like a man who distrusts his own.

The child would not listen. He began to cry with all his might, saying that as long as his father was taking little Marie, he might just as well take him too. They replied that they must pass through great woods filled with wicked beasts who eat up little children. The grey would not carry three people; she had said so when they were starting, and in the country where they were going there was no bed and no supper for little boys. All these good reasons could not persuade Petit-Pierre; he threw himself on the ground, and rolled about, shrieking that his little father did not love him any more, and that if he did not take him he would never go back to the house at all, day or night.

Germain had a father's heart, as soft and weak as a woman's. His wife's death, and the care which he had been obliged to bestow all alone on his little ones, as well as the thought that these poor motherless children needed a great deal of love, combined to make him thus. So, such a sharp struggle went on within him, all the more because he was ashamed of his weakness and tried to hide his confusion from little Marie, that the sweat started out on his forehead, and his eyes grew red and almost ready to weep. At last he tried to get angry, but as he turned toward little Marie in order to let her witness his strength of mind, he saw that the good girl's face was wet with tears; all his courage forsook him and he could not keep back his own, scold and threaten as he would.

" Truly your heart is too hard," said little Marie at last, " and for myself I know that I never could refuse a child who felt so badly. Come, Germain, let's take him. Your mare is well used to carrying two people and a child, for you know that your brother-in-law and his wife, who is much heavier than I, go to market every Saturday with their boy on this good beast's back. Take him on the horse in front of you. Besides, I should rather walk on foot all alone than give this little boy so much pain."

" Never mind," answered Germain, who was dying to allow himself to give way. " The grey is strong, and could carry two more if there were room on her back. But what can we do with this child on the way? He will be cold and hungry, and who will take care of him to-night and to-morrow, put him to bed, wash him, and dress him? I don't dare give this trouble to a woman I don't know, who will think, doubtless, that I am exceedingly free and easy with her to begin with."

"Trust me, Germain, you will know her at once by the kindness or the impatience that she shows. If she does not care to receive your Pierre, I will take charge of him myself. I will go to her house and dress him, and I will take him to the fields with me to-morrow. I will amuse him all day long, and take good care that he does not want for anything."

"He will tire you, my poor girl, and give you trouble. A whole day is a long time."

"Not at all; it will give me pleasure; he will keep me company, and that will make me less sad the first day that I must pass in a new place. I shall fancy that I am still at home."

Seeing that little Marie was pleading for him, the child seized upon her skirt and held it so tight that they must have hurt him in order to tear it away. When he perceived that his father was weakening, he took Marie's hand in both his tiny sunburned fists and kissed her, leaping for joy, and pulling her toward the mare with the burning impatience children feel in their desires.

"Come along," said the young girl, lifting him in her arms; "let us try to quiet his poor little heart. It is fluttering like a little bird; and if you feel the cold when night comes on, tell me, my Pierre, and I will wrap you in my cape. Kiss your little father, and beg his pardon for being naughty. Tell him that you will never, never be so again. Do you hear?"

"Yes, yes, provided that I always do just as he wishes. Isn't it so?" said Germain, drying the little boy's eyes with his handkerchief. "Marie, you are spoiling the little rascal.

But really and truly, you are too good, little Marie. I don't know why you did not come to us as shepherdess last Saint John's Day. You would have taken care of my children, and I should much rather pay a good price for their sake than try to find a woman who will think, perhaps, she is doing me a great kindness if she does not detest them."

"You must not look on the dark side of things," answered little Marie, holding the horse's bridle while Germain placed his son in front of the big pack-saddle covered with goatskin. "If your wife does not care for children, take me into your service next year, and you may be sure I shall amuse them so well that they will not notice anything."

VI

ON THE HEATH

"DEAR me," said Germain, after they had gone a few steps farther, "what will they think at home when they miss the little man? The family will be worried, and will be looking everywhere for him."

"You can tell the man who is mending the road up there that you are taking him along, and ask him to speak to your people."

"That is very true, Marie; you don't forget anything. It never occurred to me that Jeannie must be there."

"He lives close to the farm, and he will not fail to do your errand."

When they had taken this precaution, Germain put the mare to a trot, and Petit-Pierre was so overjoyed that for a time he forgot that he had gone without his dinner; but the motion of the horse gave him a hollow feeling in his stomach, and at the end of a league, he began to gape and grow pale, and confessed that he was dying of hunger.

"This is the way it begins," exclaimed Germain. "I was quite sure that we should not go far without this young gentleman crying with hunger or thirst."

"I am thirsty, too!" said Petit-Pierre.

"Very well, then, let's go to Mother Rebec's tavern at Corlay, the sign of 'The Dawn'— a pretty sign, but a poor lodging. You will take something to drink, too, will you not, Marie?"

"No, no; I don't want anything. I will hold the mare while you go in with the child."

"But I remember, my good girl, that this morning you gave the bread from your own breakfast to my Pierre. You have had nothing to eat. You would not take dinner with us at home; you would do nothing but cry."

"Oh, I was not hungry; I felt too sad, and I give you my word that even now I have no desire to eat."

"You must oblige yourself to eat, little girl, else you will fall sick. We have a long way to go, and it will not do to arrive half-starved and beg for bread before we say how d'ye do. I shall set you a good example myself, although I am not very hungry: and I am sure that I can, for, after all, I did not eat any dinner. I saw you crying, you and your mother, and it made me feel sad. Come along. I am going to tie the grey at the door. Get down; I wish you to."

All three entered the inn, and in less than fifteen minutes the fat, lame hostess was able to place before them a nice-looking omelette, some brown bread, and a bottle of light wine.

Peasants do not eat quickly, and little Pierre had such a good appetite that a whole hour passed before Germain could think of starting out again. At first little Marie ate in order to be obliging; then little by little she grew hungry. For, at sixteen, a girl cannot fast for long, and country air is dictatorial.

The kind words with which Germain knew how to comfort her and strengthen her courage, produced their effect. She tried hard to persuade herself that seven months would soon be over, and to think of the pleasure in store for her when she saw once more her family and her hamlet; for Father Maurice and Germain had both promised to take her into their service. But just as she began to cheer up and play with little Pierre, Germain was so unfortunate as to point out to her from the inn window the lovely view of the valley which can all be seen from this height, and which looks so happy and green and fertile.

Marie looked and asked if the houses of Belair were in sight.

"No doubt," said Germain, "and the farm too, and even your house—see! that tiny grey spot not far from Godard's big poplar, below the belfry."

"Ah, I see it," said the little girl; and then she began to cry.

"I ought not to have made you think of it," said Germain. "I can do nothing but stupid things to-day. Come along, Marie; let's start, and in an hour, when the moon rises, it will not be hot."

They resumed their journey across the great heath, and for fear of tiring the young girl and the child by too rapid a trot, Germain did not make the grey go very fast. The sun had set when they left the road to enter the wood.

Germain knew the way as far as Magnier, but he thought it would be shorter to avoid the Chantaloube road and descend by Presles and La Sépulture, a route he was not in the habit of taking on his way to the fair. He lost his way, and wasted more time before he reached the wood. Even then he did not enter it on the right side, although he did not perceive his mistake, so that he turned his back on Fourche, and took a direction higher up on the way to Ardente.

He was prevented still further from finding his way by a thick mist which rose as the night fell; one of those mists which come on autumn evenings when the whiteness of the moonlight renders them more undefined and more treacherous. The great pools of water scattered through the glades gave forth a vapour so dense that when the grey crossed them, their presence was known only by a splashing noise, and the difficulty with which she drew her feet from the mud.

At last they found a good straight road, and when they came to the end of it, and Germain tried to discover where he was, he saw that he was lost. For Father Maurice had told him, when he explained the way, that on leaving the wood he must descend a very steep hillside, cross a wide meadow, and ford the river twice. He had even warned him to cross this river carefully; for, early in the season, there had been great rains, and the water might still be higher than usual. Seeing neither hillside, nor meadows, nor river, but a heath, level and white as a mantle of snow, Germain stopped, looked about for a house, and waited for a passer-by, but could find nothing to set him right. Then he retraced his steps and re-entered the wood. But the mist thickened yet more, the moon was completely hidden, the roads were execrable, and the quagmires deep. Twice the grey almost fell. Her heavy load made her lose courage, and although she kept enough sagacity to avoid the tree-trunks, she could not prevent her riders from striking the great branches which overhung the road at the height of their heads and caused them great danger. In one of these collisions Germain lost his hat, and only recovered it after much difficulty. Petit-Pierre had fallen asleep, and, lying like a log in his father's arms, hampered him so that he could no longer hold up nor direct the horse.

"I believe we are bewitched," exclaimed Germain, stopping; "for the wood is not large enough to get lost in, if a man is not drunk, and here we have been turning round and round for two hours at least, without finding a way out. The grey has but one idea in her head, and that is to get home. It is she who is deceiving me. If we wish to go home, we have only to give her the bit. But when we are perhaps but two steps from our journey's end, it would be foolish to give up and return such a long road; and yet I am at a loss what to do. I can't see sky or earth, and I am afraid that the child will catch the fever if we remain in this cursed fog, or that he will be crushed beneath our weight if the horse falls forward."

"We must not persist longer," said little Marie. "Let's dismount, Germain. Give me the child; I can carry him perfectly well, and I know better than you how to keep the cloak from falling open and leaving him exposed. You lead the mare by her bridle. Perhaps we shall see more clearly when we are nearer the ground."

This precaution was of service only in saving them from a fall, for the fog hung low and seemed to stick to the damp earth.

Their advance was painfully slow, and they were soon so weary that they halted when they reached a dry spot beneath the great oaks.

Little Marie was in a violent sweat, but she uttered not a word of complaint, nor did she worry about anything. Thinking only of the child, she sat down on the sand and laid it upon her knees, while Germain explored the neighbourhood, after having fastened the grey's reins to the branch of a tree.

But the grey was very dissatisfied with the journey. She reared suddenly, broke the reins loose, burst her girths, and giving, by way of receipt, half a dozen kicks higher than her head, she started across the clearing, showing very plainly that she needed no one to show her the way home.

"Well, here we are afoot," said Germain, after a vain attempt to catch the horse, "and it would do us no good now if we were on the good road, for we should have to ford the river on foot, and since these paths are filled with water, we may be sure that the meadow is wholly submerged. We don't know the other routes. We must wait until this fog clears. It can't last more than an hour or two; as soon as we can see clearly, we shall look about for a house, the first we come to near the edge of the wood. But for the present we can't stir from here. There is a ditch and a pond over there. Heaven knows what is in front of us, and what is behind us is more than I can say now, for I have forgotten which way we came."

VII

UNDERNEATH THE BIG OAKS

"Well, we must be patient, Germain," said little Marie, "We are not badly off on this little hillock. The rain does not pierce the leaves of these big oaks, and we can light a fire, for I can feel old stumps which stir readily and are dry enough to burn. You have a light, Germain, have you not? You were smoking your pipe a few minutes ago."

"I did have; my tinderbox was in my bag on the saddle with the game that I was bringing to my bride that is to be, but that devilish mare has run away with everything, even with my cloak, which she will lose and tear to bits on every branch she comes to."

"No, no, Germain; saddle and cloak and bag are all there on the ground at your feet. The grey burst her girths, and threw off everything as she ran away."

"That's true, thank God," exclaimed the labourer; "if we can grope about and find a little dead wood, we shall be able to dry ourselves and get warm."

"That's not difficult," said little Marie; "dead wood always cracks when you step on it. But will you give me the saddle?"

"What do you want of it?"

"To make a bed for the child. No, not that way. Upside down. He will not roll off into the hollow, and it is still very warm from the horse's back. Prop it up all around with the stones that you see there."

"I can't see a stone; you must have cat's eyes."

"There, it is all done, Germain. Hand me your cloak so that you can wrap up his little feet, and throw my cape over his body. Just see if he is not as comfortable as though he were in his own bed, and feel how warm he is."

"You certainly know how to take care of children, Marie."

"I need not be a witch to do that; now get your tinder-box from your bag, and I will arrange the wood."

"This wood will never catch fire; it is too damp."

"You are always doubting, Germain. Don't you remember when you were a shepherd, and made big fires in the fields right in the midst of the rain?"

"Yes, that is a knack that belongs to children who take care of sheep; but I was made to drive the oxen as soon as I could walk."

"That is what has made your arms strong and your hands quick! Here, the fire is built; you shall see whether it does not burn. Give me the light and a handful of dry ferns. That is all right. Now blow; you are not consumptive, are you?"

"Not that I know of," said Germain, blowing like a smith's bellows. In an instant the flame leaped up, and throwing out a red glare, it rose finally in pale blue jets under the oak branches, battling with the fog, and gradually drying the atmosphere for ten feet around.

"Now I am going to sit by the child, so that the sparks may not fall on him," said the young girl. "Pile on the wood and stir up the fire, Germain; we shall not catch cold nor fever here, I will answer for it."

"Upon my word, you are a clever girl," said Germain; "and you know how to make a fire like a little fairy of the night. I feel quite revived, and my courage has come back again; for with my legs drenched up to the knees, and with the thought of staying this way till daylight, I was in a very bad temper just now."

"And when people are in a bad temper they don't think of anything," answered little Marie.

"And are you never bad-tempered?"

"No, never; what is the good of it?"

"Oh, of course, there is no good; but how can you help it when you have troubles? Yet Heaven knows that you have not lacked them, my little girl; for you have not always been happy."

"It is true that my mother and I have suffered. We have had sorrows, but we have never lost heart."

"I should never lose heart, no matter how hard my work was," said Germain, "but poverty would make me very sad; for I have never wanted for anything. My wife made me rich, and I am rich still; I shall be so as long as I work on the farm; and that will be always, I hope. But everybody must suffer his share! I have suffered in another way."

"Yes; you have lost your wife. That is very sad."

"Isn't it?"

"Oh, Germain, I have wept for her many a time. She was so very kind! But don't let us talk about her longer, for I shall burst out crying. All my troubles are ready to come back to me to-day."

"It is true, she loved you dearly, little Marie. She used to make a great deal of you and your mother. Are you crying? Come, my girl, I don't want to cry. . . ."

"But you are crying, Germain! You are crying as hard as I. Why should a man be ashamed to weep for his wife? Don't let me trouble you. That sorrow is mine as well as yours."

"You have a kind heart, Marie, and it does me good to weep with you. Put your feet nearer the fire; your skirts are all soaked, too, poor little girl. I am going to take your place by the boy. You move nearer the fire."

"I am hot enough," said Marie; "and if you wish to sit down, take a corner of the cloak. I am perfectly comfortable."

"The truth is that it is not so bad here," said Germain, as he sat down beside her. "Only I feel very hungry again.

It is almost nine o'clock, and I have had such hard work in walking over these vile roads that I feel quite tired out. Are you not hungry, too, little Marie?"

"I?—not at all. I am not accustomed like you to four meals a day, and I have been to bed so often without my supper that once more does not trouble me."

"A woman like you is very convenient; she costs nothing," said Germain, smiling.

"I am not a woman," exclaimed Marie, naïvely, without perceiving the direction the husbandman's ideas had taken. "Are you dreaming?"

"Yes, I believe I must be dreaming," answered Germain. "Perhaps hunger is making my mind wander."

"How greedy you are," answered she, brightening in her turn. "Well, if you can't live five or six hours without eating, have you not game in your bag and fire to cook it?"

"By Jove, that's a good idea! But how about the present to my future father-in-law?"

"You have six partridges and a hare! I suppose you do not need all of them to satisfy your appetite."

"But how can we cook them without a spit or andirons. They will be burned to a cinder!"

"Not at all," said little Marie; "I warrant that I can cook them for you under the cinders without a taste of smoke. Have you never caught larks in the fields, and cooked them between two stones? Oh! that is true—I keep forgetting that you have never been a shepherd. Come, pluck the partridge. Not so hard! You will tear the skin."

"You might be plucking the other to show me how!"

"Then you wish to eat two? What an ogre you are! They are all plucked. I am going to cook them."

"You would make a perfect little sutler's girl, Marie, but unhappily you have no canteen, and I shall have to drink water from this pool!"

"You would like some wine, would you not? Possibly you might prefer coffee. You imagine yourself under the trees at the fair. Call out the host. Some wine for the good husbandman of Belair!"

"You little witch, you are making fun of me! Would not you drink some wine if you had it?"

"I? At Mother Rebec's, with you to-night, I drank some for the second time in my life. But if you are very good, I shall give you a bottle almost full, and excellent too."

"What? Marie, I verily believe you are a witch!"

"Were you not foolish enough to ask for two bottles of wine at the inn? You and your boy drank one, and the other you set before me. I hardly drank three drops, yet you paid for both without looking."

"What then?"

"Why, I put the full one in my basket, because I thought that you or your child would be thirsty on the journey. And here it is."

"You are the most thoughtful girl I have ever met. Although the poor child was crying when we left the inn, that did not prevent her from thinking of others more than of herself. Little Marie, the man who marries you will be no fool."

"I hope not, for I am not fond of fools. Come, eat up your partridges; they are done to a turn; and for want of bread, you must be satisfied with chestnuts."

"Where the deuce did you find chestnuts, too?"

"It is extraordinary! All along the road I picked them off the branches as we went along, and filled my pockets."

"And are they cooked, too?"

"Where would my wits have been had I not had sense enough to put the chestnuts in the fire as soon as it was lighted? That is the way we always do in the fields."

"So we are going to take supper together, little Marie. I want to drink your health and wish you a good husband, just the sort of a man that will suit you. Tell me what kind you want."

"I should find that very difficult, Germain, for I have not thought about it yet."

"What, not at all? Never?" said Germain, as he began to eat with a labourer's appetite, yet stopping to cut off the more tender morsels for his companion, who persisted in refusing them and contented herself with a few chestnuts.

"Tell me, little Marie," he went on, seeing that she had no intention of answering him, "have you never thought of marrying? Yet you are old enough?"

"Perhaps," she said, "but I am too poor. I need at least a hundred crowns to marry, and I must work five or six years to scrape them together."

"Poor girl, I wish Father Maurice were willing to give me a hundred crowns to make you a present of."

"Thank you kindly, Germain. What do you suppose people would say of me?"

"What do you wish them to say of you? They know very well that I am too old to marry you. They would never believe that I—that you——"

"Look, Germain, your child is waking up," said little Marie.

VIII

THE EVENING PRAYER

Petit-Pierre had raised his head and was looking about him with a thoughtful air.

"Oh, that is the way he always does, whenever he hears the sound of eating," said Germain. "The explosion of a cannon would not rouse him, but if you work your jaws near him, he opens his eyes at once."

"You must have been just like him at his age," said little Marie, with a sly smile. "See! my Petit-Pierre, you are looking for your canopy. To-night it is made all of green, my child; but your father eats his supper none the less. Do you wish to sup with him? I have not eaten your share; I thought that you might claim it."

"Marie, I wish you to eat," cried the husbandman; "I shall not touch another morsel. I am a greedy glutton. You are depriving yourself for our sake. It is not fair. I am ashamed. It takes away all my appetite. I will not have my son eat his supper unless you take some too."

"Leave us alone," said little Marie; "you have not the key to our appetites. Mine is tight shut to-day, but your Pierre's is as wide open as a little wolf's. Just see how he seizes his food. He will be a strong workman too, some day!"

In truth, Petit-Pierre showed very soon whose son he was, and though scarcely awake and wholly at a loss to know where he was and how he had come there, he began to eat ravenously. As soon as his hunger was appeased, feeling excited as children do who break loose from their wonted habits, he had more wit, more curiosity, and more good sense than usual. He made them explain to him where he was, and when he found that he was in the midst of a forest, he grew a little frightened.

“Are there wicked beasts in this forest?” he demanded of his father.

“No, none at all. Don't be afraid.”

“Then you told a story when you said that if I went with you into the great forest, the wolves would carry me off.”

“Just see this logician,” said Germain, embarrassed.

“He is right,” replied little Marie. “That is what you told him. He has a good memory, and has not forgotten. But, little Pierre, you must learn that your father never tells a story. We passed through the big forest whilst you were sleeping, and now we are in the small forest where there are no wicked beasts.”

“Is the little forest very far away from the big one?”

“Far enough; besides, the wolves never go out of the big forest. And then, if some of them should come here, your father would kill them.”

“And you too, little Marie?”

“Yes, we, too, for you would help also, my Pierre. You are not frightened, are you? You would beat them soundly?”

“Yes, indeed, I would,” said the child, proudly, as he struck an heroic attitude; “we would kill them.”

“There is nobody like you for talking to children and for making them listen to reason,” said Germain to little Marie. “To be sure, it is not long ago since you were a small child yourself, and you have not forgotten what your mother used to say to you. I believe that the younger one is, the better one gets on with children. I am very much afraid that a woman of thirty who does not yet know what it is to be a mother, would find it hard to prattle to children and reason with them.”

"Why, Germain? I don't know why you have such a bad idea of this woman; you will change your mind."

"The devil take the woman!" exclaimed Germain. "I wish I were going away from her forever. What do I want of a wife whom I don't know?"

"Little father," said the child, "why is it that you speak so much of your wife to-day, since she is dead?"

"Then you have not forgotten your poor, dear mother?"

"No; for I saw her placed in a beautiful box of white wood, and my grandmother led me up to her to kiss her and say good-bye. She was very white and very stiff, and every evening my aunt made me pray God that she might go to Him in Heaven and be warm. Do you think that she is there now?"

"I hope so, my child; but you must always pray. It shows your mother that you love her."

"I am going to say my prayers," answered the boy. "I forgot them to-night. But I can't say them all alone, for I always forget something. Little Marie must help me."

"Yes, my Pierre, I will help you," said the young girl. "Come and kneel down in my lap."

The child knelt down on the girl's skirt. He clasped his little hands and began to say his prayers, at first with great care and earnestness, for he knew the beginning very well, then slowly and with more hesitation, and finally repeating word by word after Marie, when he came to that place in his prayer where sleep overtook him so invariably that he had never been able to learn the end. This time again the effort of close attention and the monotony of his own accent produced their wonted effect. He pronounced the last syllables with great difficulty, and only after they were thrice repeated.

His head grew heavy and fell on Marie's breast; his hands unclasped, divided, and fell open on his knees. By the light of the camp-fire, Germain watched his little darling hushed at the heart of the young girl, who, as she held him in her arms and warmed his fair hair with her sweet breath, had herself fallen into a holy reverie, and prayed in quiet for the soul of Catherine.

Germain was touched. He tried to express to little Marie the grateful esteem which he felt for her, but he could find no fitting words.

He approached her to kiss his son, whom she held close to her breast, and he could scarcely raise his lips from little Pierre's brow.

"You kiss too hard," said Marie, gently pushing away the husbandman's head. "You will wake him. Let me put him back to bed, for the boy has left us already for dreams of paradise."

The child allowed Marie to lay him down, but feeling the goatskin on the saddle, he asked if he were on the grey. Then opening his big blue eyes, and keeping them fixed on the branches for a minute, he seemed to be dreaming, wide-awake as he was, or to be struck with an idea which had slipped his mind during the daytime, and only assumed a distinct form at the approach of sleep.

"Little father," said he, "if you wish to give me a new mother, I hope it will be little Marie."

And without waiting for an answer, he closed his eyes and slept.

IX

DESPITE THE COLD

LITTLE MARIE seemed to give no more heed to the child's odd words than to regard them as a proof of friendship. She wrapped him up with care, stirred the fire, and as the fog resting on the neighbouring pool gave no sign of lifting, she advised Germain to lie near the fire and take a nap.

"I see that you are sleepy already," said she, "for you don't say a word and you gaze into the fire, just as your little boy was doing."

"It is you who must sleep," answered the husbandman, "and I will take care of both of you, for I have never felt less sleepy than I do now. I have fifty things to think of."

"Fifty is a great many," said the little girl, with a mocking accent. "There are lots of people who would be delighted to have one."

"Well, if I am too stupid to have fifty, I have one, at least, which has not left me for the past hour."

"And I shall tell it to you as well as I told you those you thought of before."

"Yes, do tell me if you know, Marie. Tell me yourself. I shall be glad to hear."

"An hour ago," she answered, "your idea was to eat—and now it is to sleep."

"Marie, I am only an ox-driver, but, upon my word, you take me for an ox. You are very perverse, and it is easy to see that you do not care to talk to me, so go to sleep. That will be better than to pick flaws in a man who is out of sorts."

"If you wish to talk, let's talk," said the girl, half reclining near the child and resting her head against the saddle. "You torment yourself, Germain, and you do not show much courage for a man. What wouldn't I say if I didn't do my best to fight my own troubles?"

"Yes, that's very true, and that's just what I am thinking of, my poor child. You are going to live, away from your friends, in a horrid country full of moors and fens, where you will catch the autumn fevers. Sheep do not pay well there, and this is always discouraging for a shepherdess if she means well. Then you will be surrounded by strangers who may not be kind to you and will not know how much you are worth. It makes me more sorry than I can tell you, and I have a great desire to take you home to your mother instead of going on to Fourche."

"You talk very kindly, but there is no reason for your misgivings, my poor Germain. You ought not to lose heart on your friend's account, and instead of showing me the dark side of my lot, you should show me the bright side, as you did after lunch at Rebec's."

"What can I do? That's the way it appeared to me then, and now my ideas are changed. It is best for you to take a husband."

"That cannot be, Germain, and as it is out of the question, I think no more about it."

"Yet such a thing might happen. Perhaps if you told me what kind of a man you want, I might imagine somebody."

"Imagining is not finding. For myself, I never imagine, for it does no good."

"You are not looking for a rich man?"

"Certainly not, for I am as poor as Job."

"But if he were comfortably off, you wouldn't be sorry to have a good house, and good food, and good clothes, and to live with an honest family who would allow you to help your mother."

"Oh, yes, indeed! It is my own wish to help my mother."

"And if this man were to turn up, you would not be too hard to please, even if he were not so very young."

"Ah! There you must excuse me, Germain. That is just the point I insist on. I could never love an old man."

"An old man, of course not; but a man of my age, for example!"

"Your age is too old for me, Germain. I should like Bastien's age, though Bastien is not so good-looking as you."

"Should you rather have Bastien, the swine-herd?" said Germain, indignantly. "A fellow with eyes shaped like those of the pigs he drives!"

"I could excuse his eyes, because he is eighteen."

Germain felt terribly jealous.

"Well," said he, "it's clear that you want Bastien, but, none the less, it's a queer idea."

"Yes, that would be a queer idea," answered little Marie, bursting into shouts of laughter, "and he would make a queer husband. You could gull him to your heart's content. For instance, the other day, I had picked up a tomato in the curate's garden. I told him that it was a fine, red apple, and he bit into it like a glutton. If you had only seen what a face he made. Heavens! how ugly he was!"

"Then you don't love him, since you are making fun of him."

"That wouldn't be a reason. But I don't like him. He is unkind to his little sister, and he is dirty."

"Don't you care for anybody else?"

"How does that concern you, Germain?"

"Not at all, except that it gives me something to talk about. I see very well, little girl, that you have a sweetheart in your mind already."

"No, Germain, you're wrong. I have no sweetheart yet. Perhaps one may come later, but since I cannot marry until I have something laid by, I am destined to marry late in life and with an old man."

"Then take an old man without delay."

"No. When I am no longer young, I shall not care; for the present, it is different."

"I see that I displease you, Marie; that's clear enough," said Germain, impatiently, and without stopping to weigh his words.

Little Marie did not answer. Germain bent over her. She was sleeping. She had fallen back, overcome, stricken down, as it were, by slumber, as children are who sleep before they cease to babble.

Germain was glad that she had not caught his last words. He felt that they were unwise, and he turned his back to distract his attention and change his thoughts.

It was all in vain. He could neither sleep nor think of anything except the words he had just spoken. He walked about the fire twenty times; he moved away; he came back. At last, feeling himself tremble as though he had swallowed gunpowder, he leaned against the tree which sheltered the two children, and watched them as they slept.

"I know not how it is," thought he; "I have never noticed that little Marie is the prettiest girl in the countryside. She has not much colour, but her little face is fresh as a wild rose. What a charming mouth she has, and how pretty her little nose is! She is not large for her age, but she is formed like a little quail and is as light as a bird. I cannot understand why they made so much fuss at home over a big, fat woman with a bright red face. My wife was rather slender and pale, and she pleased me more than any one else. This girl is very frail, but she is healthy, and she is pretty to watch as a white kid. And then she has such a gentle, frank expresson. You can read her good heart in her eyes even though they are closed in sleep. As to wit, I must confess she has more than ever my dear Catherine had, and she would never become wearisome. She is gay, wise, industrious, loving, and she is amusing. I don't know what more I could wish for. . . .

"But what is the use of thinking of all this?" Germain went on, trying to look in another direction. "My father-in-law would not hear of it, and all the family would think me mad! Besides, she would not have me herself, poor child! She thinks me too old; she told me so. She is unselfish, and does not mind poverty and worry, wearing old clothes, and suffering from hunger for two or three months every year, so long as she can satisfy her heart some day and give herself to the man she loves. She is right. I should do the same in her place, and even now, if I had my own way, instead of marrying a wife whom I don't care for, I would choose a girl after my own heart."

The more Germain tried to compose himself by reasoning, the further he was from succeeding. He walked away a dozen steps, to lose himself in the fog; then, all of a sudden, he found himself on his knees beside the two sleeping children. Once he wished to kiss Petit-Pierre, who had one arm about Marie's neck, and made such a mistake that Marie felt a breath, hot as fire, cross her lips, and awaking, looked about her with a bewildered expression, totally ignorant of all that was passing within his mind.

"I didn't see you, my poor children," said Germain, retreating rapidly. "I almost stumbled over you and hurt you."

Little Marie was so innocent that she believed him, and fell asleep again. Germain walked to the opposite side of the fire, and swore to God that he would not stir until she had waked. He kept his word, but not without a struggle. He thought that he would go mad.

At length, toward midnight, the fog lifted, and Germain could see the stars shining through the trees. The moon freed herself from the mist which had hidden her, and began to sow her diamonds over the damp moss. The trunks of the oak-trees remained in impressive darkness, but beyond, the white branches of the birch-trees seemed a long line of phantoms in their shrouds. The fire cast its reflection in the pool; and the frogs, growing accustomed to the light, hazarded a few shrill and uneasy notes; the rugged branches of the old trees, bristling with dim-coloured lichens, crossed and intertwined themselves, like great gaunt arms, above the travellers' heads. It was a lovely spot, but so lonely and so sad that Germain, unable to endure it more, began to sing and throw stones into the water to forget the dread weariness of solitude. He was anxious also to wake little Marie, and when he saw her rise and look about at the weather, he proposed that they start on their journey.

" In two hours," said he, " the approach of morning will chill the air so that we can't stay here in spite of our fire. Now we can see our way, and we shall soon find a house which will open its doors to us, or at least a barn where we can pass the rest of the night under shelter."

Marie had no will of her own, and although she was longing to sleep, she made ready to follow Germain. The husbandman took his boy in his arms without awaking him, and beckoned Marie to come nearer, in order to cover her with his cloak. For she would not take her own mantle, which was wrapped about the child.

When he felt the young girl so close to him, Germain, who for a time had succeeded in distracting his mind and raising his spirits, began to lose his head once more. Two or three times he strode ahead abruptly, leaving her to walk alone. Then seeing how hard it was for her to follow, he waited, drew her quickly to his side, and pressed her so tight that she was surprised, and even angry, though she dared not say so.

As they knew not the direction whence they had come, they had no idea of that in which they were going. So they crossed the wood once more, and found themselves afresh before the lonely moor. Then they retraced their steps, and after much turning and twisting they spied a light across the branches.

" Good enough! Here's a house," exclaimed Germain.

"And the people are already astir, for the fire is lighted. It must be very late."

It was no house, but the camp-fire, which they had covered before they left, and which had sprung up in the breeze.

They had tramped for two hours, only to find themselves at the very place from which they had started.

X

BENEATH THE STARS

"This time I give up," said Germain, stamping his foot. "We are bewitched, that is certain, and we shall not get away from here before broad day. The devil is in this place!"

"Well, it's of no use to get angry," said Marie. "We must take what is given us. Let us make a big fire. The child is so well wrapped up that he is in no danger, and we shall not die from a single night out of doors. Where have you hidden the saddle, Germain? Right in the midst of the holly-bushes,—what a goose you are! It's very convenient to get it from there!"

"Stop, child; hold the boy while I pull his bed from the thorns. I didn't want you to scratch your hands."

"It's all done. Here's the bed, and a few scratches are not sabre-cuts," replied the brave girl.

She proceeded to put the child to bed again, and Petit-Pierre was so sound asleep this time that he knew nothing of his last journey. Germain piled so much wood on the fire that the forest all about glowed with the light.

Little Marie had come to the end of her powers, and although she did not complain, her legs would support her no longer. She was white, and her teeth chattered with cold and weakness. Germain took her in his arms to warm her. The uneasiness, the compassion, the tenderness of movement he could not repress, took possession of his heart and stilled his senses. As by a miracle his tongue was loosened, and every feeling of shame vanished.

"Marie," said he, "I like you, and I am very sorry that you don't like me. If you would take me for your husband, there are no fathers, nor family, nor neighbours, nor arguments which could prevent me from giving myself to you. I know how happy you would make my children, and that you would teach them to love the memory of their mother, and with a quiet conscience I could satisfy the wishes of my heart. I have always been fond of you, and now I love you so well that were you to ask me to spend all my life in doing your pleasure, I would swear to do it on the instant. Please think how much I love you, and try to forget my age. Think that it is a wrong notion to believe that a man of thirty is old. Besides, I am but twenty-eight. A young girl is afraid that people will talk about her if she takes a man ten or twelve years older than she, simply because that is not the custom in our country, but I have heard say that in other countries people don't look at it in this light, and that they had rather allow a sensible man of approved courage to support a young girl, than trust her to a mere boy, who may go astray, and, from the honest fellow they thought him, turn into a good-for-nothing. And then years don't always make age. That depends on the health and strength a person has. When a man is used up by overwork and poverty, or by a bad life, he is old before twenty-five. While I—but Marie, you are not listening. . . ."

"Yes, I am, Germain; I hear you perfectly," answered little Marie, "but I am thinking over what my mother used to tell me so often: that a woman of sixty is to be pitied greatly when her husband is seventy or seventy-five and can no longer work to support her. He grows feeble, and it becomes her duty to nurse him at the very age when she begins to feel great need of care and rest herself, and so it is that the end comes in a garret."

"Parents do well to say so, I admit," answered Germain, "but then they would sacrifice all their youth, the best years of their life, to calculating what will become of them at the age when a person is no longer good for anything, and when it is a matter of indifference which way death comes. But I am in no danger of starving in my old age. I am even going to lay by something, since I live with my wife's parents and spend nothing. And then, you see, I shall love you so well that I can never grow old. They say that when a man is happy he keeps sound, and I know well that in love for you, I am younger than Bastien; for he does not love you; he is too stupid, too much of a child to understand how pretty and how good you are, and how you were made for people to court. Do not hate me, Marie. I am not a bad man. I made my Catherine happy, and on her death-bed she swore before God that she had had only happiness of me, and she asked me to marry again. Her spirit must have spoken to her child to-night. Did you not hear the words he said? How his little lips quivered as his eyes stared upward, watching something that we could not see! He was surely looking at his mother, and it was she who made him say that he wished you to take her place."

"Germain," answered Marie, amazed and yet thoughtful, "you speak frankly, and everything that you say is true. I am sure that I should do well to love you if it did not displease your parents too much. But what can I do? My heart does not speak for you. I am very fond of you, but though your age does not make you ugly, it makes me afraid. It seems as if you were some such relation to me, as an uncle or a godfather, that I must be respectful toward you, and that there might be moments when you would treat me like a little girl rather than like your wife and your equal. And perhaps my friends would make fun of me, and although it would be silly to give heed to that, I think that I should be a little sad on my wedding-day."

"Those are but childish reasons, Marie; you speak like a child."

"Yes, that is true; I am a child," said she, "and it is on that account I am afraid of too sensible a man. You must see that I am too young for you, since you just found fault with me for speaking foolishly. I can't have more sense than my age allows."

"O Heavens! how unlucky I am to be so clumsy and to express so ill what I think!" cried Germain. "Marie, you don't love me. That is the long and short of it. You find me too simple and too dull. If you loved me at all, you would not see my faults so clearly. But you do not love me. That is the whole story."

"That is not my fault," answered she, a little hurt that he was speaking with less tenderness. "I am doing my best to hear you, but the more I try the less I can get it into my head that we ought to be husband and wife."

Germain did not answer. His head dropped into his hands, and little Marie could not tell whether he wept or sulked or was fast asleep. She felt uneasy when she saw him so cast down, and could not guess what was passing in his mind. But she dared not speak to him more, and as she was too astonished at what had passed to have any desire to sleep, she waited impatiently for dawn, tending the fire with care and watching over the child, whose existence Germain appeared to forget. Yet Germain was not asleep. He did not mope over his lot. He made no plans to encourage himself, nor schemes to entrap the girl. He suffered; he felt a great weight of grief at his heart. He wished that he were dead. The world seemed to turn against him, and if he could have wept at all, his tears would have come in floods. But mingled with his sorrow there was a feeling of anger against himself, and he felt choked, without the power or the wish to complain.

When morning came, and the sounds of the country brought it to Germain's senses, he lifted his head from his hands and rose. He saw that little Marie had slept no more than he, but he knew no words in which to tell her of his anxiety. He was very discouraged. Hiding the grey's saddle once more in the thicket, he slung his sack over his shoulder and took his son by the hand.

"Now, Marie," said he, "we are going to try to end our journey. Do you wish me to take you to Ormeaux?"

"Let us leave the woods together," answered she, "and when we know where we are, we shall separate, and go our different ways."

Germain did not answer. He felt hurt that the girl did not ask him to take her as far as Ormeaux, and he did not notice that he had asked her in a tone well fitted to provoke a refusal.

After a few hundred steps, they met a wood-cutter, who pointed out the high road, and told them that when they had crossed the plain, one must turn to the right, the other to the left, to gain their different destinations, which were so near together that the houses of Fourche were in plain sight from the farm of Ormeaux, and *vice versa*.

When they had thanked him and passed on, the wood-cutter called them back to ask whether they had not lost a horse.

"Yes," he said, "I found a pretty grey mare in my yard, where perhaps a wolf had driven her to seek refuge; my dogs barked the whole night long, and at daybreak I saw the mare under my shed. She is there now. Come along with me, and if you recognise her, you may take her."

When Germain had given a description of the grey, and felt convinced that it was really she, he started back to find his saddle. Little Marie offered to take his child to Ormeaux, whither he might go to get him after he had introduced himself at Fourche.

"He is rather dirty after the night that we have passed," said she. "I will brush his clothes, wash his pretty face, and comb his hair, and when he looks neat and clean, you can present him to your new family."

"Who told you that I wish to go to Fourche?" answered Germain, petulantly. "Perhaps I shall not go."

"But truly, Germain, it is your duty to go there. You will go there," replied the girl.

"You seem very anxious to have me married off, so that you may be quite sure that I shall not trouble you again?"

"Germain, you must not think of that any more. It is an idea which came to you in the night, because this unfortunate mishap took away your spirits. But now you must come to your senses. I promise you to forget everything that you said to me, and not to breathe it to a soul."

"Oh, say what you wish. It is not my custom to deny what I have spoken. What I told you was true and honest, and I shall not blush for it before anybody."

"Yes, but if your wife were to know that just before you came you were thinking of another woman, it would prejudice her against you. So take care how you speak now. Don't look at me before everybody with such a rapt expression. Think of Father Maurice, who relies on your obedience, and who would be enraged at me if I were to turn you from his will. Good-bye, Germain. I take Petit-Pierre in order to force you to go to Fourche. He is a pledge which I keep on your behalf."

"So you want to go with her?" said the husbandman to his son, seeing that the boy had clasped Marie's hands and was following her resolutely.

"Yes, father," answered the child, who had heard the conversation and understood after his own fashion the words spoken so unguardedly before him. "I am going away with my dearest little Marie. You shall come to find me when you have done marrying, but I wish Marie to be my little mother."

"You see how much he wishes it," said Germain to the girl. "Listen to me, Petit-Pierre," he added. "I wish her to be your mother and to stay with you always. It is she who does not wish to. Try to make her grant you what she has denied me."

"Don't be afraid, father, I shall make her say yes. Little Marie does everything that I wish."

He walked away with the young girl. Germain stood alone, sadder and more irresolute than ever.

XI

THE BELLE OF THE VILLAGE

And after all, when he had brushed the dust of travel from his clothes and from his horse's harness, when he had mounted the grey, and when he had learned the road, he felt that there was no retreat and that he must forget that anxious night as though it had been a dangerous dream.

He found Father Leonard seated on a trim bench of spinach-green. The six stone steps leading up to the door showed that the house had a cellar. The walls of the garden and of the hemp-field were plastered with lime and sand. It was a handsome house, and might almost have been mistaken for the dwelling of a bourgeois.

Germain's future father-in-law came forward to meet him, and having plied him, for five minutes, with questions concerning his entire family, he added that conventional phrase with which one passer-by addresses another concerning the object of his journey: "So you are taking a little trip in this part of the country?"

"I have come to see you," replied the husbandman, "to give you this little present of game with my father's compliments, and to tell you from him that you ought to know with what intentions I come to your house."

"Oh, ho!" said Father Leonard, laughing and tapping his capacious stomach, "I see, I understand, I am with you, and," he added with a wink, "you will not be the only one to pay your court, young man. There are three already in the house dancing attendance like you. I never turn anybody away, and I should find it hard to say yes or no to any of them, for they are all good matches. Yet, on account of Father Maurice and for the sake of the rich fields you till, I hope that it may be you. But my daughter is of age and mistress of her own affairs. She will do as she likes. Go in and introduce yourself. I hope that you will draw the prize."

"I beg your pardon," answered Germain, amazed to find himself an extra when he had counted on being alone in the field. "I was not aware that your daughter was supplied already with suitors, and I did not come to quarrel over her."

"If you supposed that because you were slow in coming, my daughter would be left unprovided for, you were greatly mistaken, my son," replied Father Leonard with unshaken good humour. "Catherine has the wherewithal to attract suitors, and her only difficulty lies in choosing. But come in; don't lose heart. The woman is worth a struggle."

And pushing in Germain by the shoulders with boisterous gaiety, he called to his daughter as they entered the house:

"So, Catherine, here is another!"

This cordial but unmannerly method of introduction to the widow, in the presence of her other devotees, completed Germain's distress and embarrassment. He felt the awkwardness of his position, and stood for a few moments without daring to look upon the beauty and her court.

The Widow Guérin had a good figure and did not lack freshness, but her expression and her dress displeased Germain the instant he saw her. She had a bold, self-satisfied look, and her cap, edged with three lace flounces, her silk apron, and her fichu of fine black lace were little in accord with the staid and sober widow he had pictured to himself.

Her elaborate dress and forward manner inclined Germain to judge the widow old and ugly, although she was certainly not either. He thought that such finery and playful manners might well suit little Marie's years and wit, but that the widow's fun was laboured and over bold, and that she wore her fine clothes in bad taste.

The three suitors were seated at a table loaded with wines and meats which were spread out for their use throughout the Sunday morning; for Father Leonard liked to show off his wealth, and the widow was not sorry to display her pretty china and keep a table like a rich lady. Germain, simple and unsuspecting as he was, watched everything with a penetrating glance, and for the first time in his life he kept on the defensive when he drank. Father Leonard obliged him to sit down with his rivals, and taking a chair opposite he treated him with great politeness, and talked to him rather than to the others.

The present of game, despite the breach Germain had made on his own account, was still plenteous enough to produce its effect. The widow did not look unaware of its presence, and the suitors cast disdainful glances in its direction.

Germain felt ill at ease in this company, and did not eat heartily. Father Leonard poked fun at him.

"You look very melancholy," said he, "and you are ill-using your glass. You must not allow love to spoil your appetite, for a fasting lover can make no such pretty speeches as he whose ideas are brightened with a drop of wine."

Germain was mortified at being thought already in love, and the artificial manner of the widow, who kept lowering her eyes with a smile as a woman does who is sure of her calculations, made him long to protest against his pretended surrender; but fearing to appear uncivil, he smiled and held his peace.

He thought the widow's beaus, three bumpkins. They must have been rich for her to admit of their pretensions. One was over forty, and fat as Father Leonard; another had lost an eye, and drank like a sot. The third was a young fellow, and nice-looking too; but he kept insisting on displaying his wit, and would say things so silly that they were painful to hear. Yet the widow laughed as though she admired all his foolishness, and made small proof of her good taste thereby. At first Germain thought her infatuated with him, but soon he perceived that he himself was especially encouraged, and that they wished him to make fresh advances. For this reason he felt an increasing stiffness and severity which he took no pains to conceal.

The time came for mass, and they rose from table to go thither in company. It was necessary to walk as far as Mers, a good half-league away, and Germain was so tired that he longed to take a nap before they went; but he was not in the habit of missing mass, and he started with the others.

The roads were filled with people, and the widow marched proudly along, escorted by her three suitors, taking an arm, first of one and then of another, and carrying her head high with an air of importance. She was eager to display the fourth to the eyes of the passers-by; but Germain felt so ridiculous to be dragged along in the train of a petticoat where all the world might see, that he kept at a respectable distance, chatting with Father Leonard, and succeeded in occupying his attention so well that they did not look at all as if they belonged to the party.

XII

THE MASTER

When they reached the village, the widow halted to allow them to catch up. She was bent upon making her entry with all her train; but Germain, denying her this pleasure, deserted Father Leonard, and after conversing with several acquaintances, he entered the church by another door. The widow was vexed.

When mass was over, she made her appearance in triumph on the lawn, where dancing was going on, and she began her dance with her three lovers in turn. Germain watched her and saw that she danced well, but with affectation.

"So, you don't ask my daughter?" said Leonard, tapping him on the shoulder. "You are too easily frightened."

"I have not danced since I lost my wife," answered the husbandman.

"But now that you are looking for another, mourning's over in heart as well as in clothes."

"That's no reason, Father Leonard. Besides, I am too old and I don't care for dancing."

"Listen," said Father Leonard, drawing him toward a retired corner, "when you entered my house you were vexed to see the place already besieged, and I see that you are very proud. But that is not reasonable, my boy. My daughter is used to a great deal of attention, particularly since she left off her mourning two years ago, and it is not her place to lead you on."

"Has your daughter been thinking of marrying for two years already without making her choice?" asked Germain.

"She doesn't wish to hurry, and she is right. Although she has lively manners, and although you may not think that she reflects a great deal, she is a woman of excellent common sense, and knows very well what she is about."

"It does not appear to me so," said Germain ingenuously, "for she has three suitors in her train, and if she knew her own mind, there are two of them, at least, whom she would find superfluous and request to stay at home."

"Why, Germain, you don't understand at all. She doesn't wish the old man, nor the blind man, nor the young man, I am quite certain; yet if she were to turn them off, people would think that she wished to remain a widow, and nobody else would come."

"Oh, I see. These three are used for a guide-post."

"As you like. What is the harm if they are satisfied?"

"Every man to his taste," said Germain.

"I see that yours is different. Now supposing that you are chosen, then they would leave the coast clear."

"Yes, supposing! and meanwhile how much time should I have to whistle?"

"That depends on your persuasive tongue, I suppose. Until now, my daughter has always thought that she would pass the best part of her life while she was being courted, and she is in no hurry to become the servant of one man when she can order so many others about. So she will please herself as long as the game amuses her; but if you please her more than the game, the game will cease. Only you must not lose courage. Come back every Sunday, dance with her, let her know that you are amongst her followers, and if she finds you more agreeable and better bred than the others, some fine day she will tell you so, no doubt."

"Excuse me, Father Leonard. Your daughter has the right to do as she pleases, and it is not my business to blame her. If I were in her place, I should do differently. I should be more frank, and should not waste the time of men who have, doubtless, something better to do than dancing attendance on a woman who makes fun of them. Still, if that is what amuses her and makes her happy, it is no affair of mine. Only there is one thing I must tell you which is a little embarrassing, since you have mistaken my intentions from the start, for you are so sure of what is not so, that you have given me no chance to explain. You must know, then, that I did not come here to ask for your daughter in marriage, but merely to buy a pair of oxen which you are going to take to market next week, and which my father-in-law thinks will suit him."

"I understand, Germain," answered Leonard very calmly; "you changed your plans when you saw my daughter with her admirers. It is as you please. It seems that what attracts some people repels others, and you are perfectly welcome to withdraw, for you have not declared your intentions. If you wish seriously to buy my cattle, come and see them in the pasture, and whether we make a bargain or not, you will come back to dinner with us before you return."

"I don't wish to trouble you," answered Germain. "Perhaps you have something to do here. I myself am tired of watching the dancing and standing idle. I will go to see your cattle, and I will soon join you at your house."

Then Germain made his escape, and walked away toward the meadows where Leonard had pointed out to him some of his cattle. It was true that Father Maurice intended to buy, and Germain thought that if he were to bring home a fine pair of oxen at a reasonable price, he might more easily receive a pardon for wilfully relinquishing the purpose of his journey. He walked rapidly, and soon found himself at some distance from Ormeaux. Then of a sudden, he felt a desire to kiss his son and to see little Marie once again, although he had lost all hope and even had chased away the thought that he might some day owe his happiness to her. Everything that he had heard and seen: this woman, flirtatious and vain; this father, at once shrewd and short-sighted, encouraging his daughter in habits of pride and untruth; this city luxury, which seemed to him a transgression against the dignity of country manners; this time wasted in foolish, empty words; this home so different from his own; and, above all, that deep uneasiness which comes to a labourer of the fields when he leaves his accustomed toil: all the trouble and annoyance of the past few hours made Germain long to be with his child and with his little neighbour. Even had he not been in love, he would have sought her to divert his mind and raise his spirits to their wonted level.

But he looked in vain over the neighbouring meadows. He saw neither little Marie nor little Pierre, and yet it was the hour when shepherds are in the fields. There was a large flock in a pasture. He asked of a young boy who tended them whether the sheep belonged to the farm of Ormeaux.

"Yes," said the child.

"Are you the shepherd? Do boys tend the flocks of the farm, amongst you?"

"No, I am taking care of them to-day, because the shepherdess went away. She was ill."

"But have you not a new shepherdess, who came this morning?"

"Yes, surely; but she, too, has gone already."

"What! gone? Did she not have a child with her?"

"Yes, a little boy who cried. They both went away after they had been here two hours."

"Went away! Where?"

"Where they came from, I suppose. I didn't ask them."

"But why did they go away?" asked Germain, growing more and more uneasy.

"How the deuce do I know?"

"Did they not agree about wages? Yet that must have been settled before."

"I can tell you nothing about it. I saw them come and go, nothing more."

Germain walked toward the farm and questioned the farmer. Nobody could give him an explanation; but after speaking with the farmer, he felt sure that the girl had gone without saying a word, and had taken the weeping child with her.

"Can they have been ill-treating my son?" cried Germain.

"It was your son, then? How did he happen to be with the little girl? Where do you come from, and what is your name?"

Germain, seeing that after the fashion of the country they were answering him with questions, stamped his foot impatiently, and asked to speak with the master.

The master was away. Usually, he did not spend the whole day when he came to the farm. He was on horseback, and he had ridden off to one of his other farms.

"But, honestly," said Germain, growing very anxious, "can't you tell me why this girl left?"

The farmer and his wife exchanged an odd smile. Then the former answered that he knew nothing, and that it was no business of his. All that Germain could learn was that both girl and child had started off toward Fourche. He rushed back to Fourche. The widow and her lovers were still away; so was Father Leonard. The maid told him that a girl and a child had come to ask for him, but that as she did not know them, she did not wish to let them in, and had advised them to go to Mers.

"And why did you refuse to let them in?" said Germain, angrily. "People are very suspicious in this country, where nobody opens the door to a neighbour."

"But you see," answered the maid, "in a house as rich as this, I must keep my eyes open. When the master is away, I am responsible for everything, and I cannot open the door to the first person that comes along."

"It is a bad custom," said Germain, "and I had rather be poor than to live in constant fear like that. Good-bye to you, young woman, and good-bye to your vile country."

He made inquiries at the neighbouring house. The shepherdess and child had been seen. As the boy had left Belair suddenly, carelessly dressed, with his blouse torn, and his little lambskin over his shoulders, and as little Marie was necessarily poorly clad at all times, they had been taken for beggars. People had offered them bread. The girl had accepted a crust for the child, who was hungry, then she had walked away with him very quickly, and had entered the forest.

Germain thought a minute, then he asked whether the farmer of Ormeaux had not been at Fourche.

"Yes," they answered, "he passed on horseback a few seconds after the girl."

"Was he chasing her?"

"Oh, so you understand?" answered the village publican, with a laugh. "Certain it is that he is the devil of a fellow for running after girls. But I don't believe that he caught her; though, after all, if he had seen her——"

"That is enough, thank you!" And he flew rather than ran to Leonard's stable. Throwing the saddle on the grey's back, he leaped upon it, and set off at full gallop toward the wood of Chanteloube.

His heart beat hard with fear and anger; the sweat poured down his forehead; he spurred the mare till the blood came, though the grey needed no pressing when she felt herself on the road to her stable.

XIII

THE OLD WOMAN

GERMAIN came soon to the spot where he had passed the night on the border of the pool. The fire was smoking still. An old woman was gathering the remnants of the wood little Marie had piled there. Germain stopped to question her. She was deaf and mistook his inquiries.

"Yes, my son," said she, "this is the Devil's Pool. It is an evil spot, and you must not approach it without throwing in three stones with your left hand, while you cross yourself with the right. That drives away the spirits. Otherwise trouble comes to those who go around it."

"I am not asking about that," said Germain, moving nearer her, and screaming at the top of his lungs. "Have you seen a girl and a child walking through the wood?"

"Yes," said the old woman, "a little child was drowned there."

Germain shook from head to foot; but happily the hag added:

"That happened a long time ago. In memory of the accident they raised a handsome cross there. But one stormy night, the bad spirits threw it into the water. You can still see one end of it. If anybody were unlucky enough to pass the night here, he could never find his way out before daylight. He must walk and walk, and though he went two hundred leagues into the forest, he must always return to the same place."

The peasant's imagination was aroused in spite of himself, and the thought of the evils that must come in order that the old woman's assertions might be vindicated, took so firm a hold of his mind that he felt chilled through and through. Hopeless of obtaining more news, he remounted, and traversed the woods afresh, calling Pierre with all his might, whistling, cracking his whip, and snapping the branches that the whole forest might re-echo with the noise of his coming; then he listened for an answering voice, but he heard no sound save the cow-bells scattered through the glades, and the wild cries of the swine as they fought over the acorns.

At length Germain heard behind him the noise of a horse following in his traces, and a man of middle age, dark, sturdy, and dressed after the city fashion, called to him to stop. Germain had never seen the farmer of Ormeaux, but his instinctive rage told him at once that this was the man. He turned, and eyeing him from head to foot, waited for him to speak.

" Have not you seen a young girl of fifteen or sixteen go by with a small boy? " asked the farmer, with an assumed air of indifference, although he was evidently ill at ease.

" What do you want of her? " answered Germain, taking no pains to conceal his anger.

" I might tell you that that is none of your business, my friend. But as I have no reasons for secrecy, I shall tell you that she is a shepherdess whom I engaged for a year, before I knew her. When I saw her, she looked too young and frail to work on the farm. I thanked her, but I wished to pay the expenses of her short journey, and while my back was turned, she went off in a huff. She was in such a hurry that she forgot even some of her belongings and her purse, which has certainly not much in it, probably but a few pennies; but since I was going in this direction, I hoped to meet her, and give her back the things which she left behind, as well as what I owe her."

Germain had too honest a heart not to pause at hearing a story which, however unlikely, was not impossible. He fastened his penetrating gaze on the farmer, who submitted to the examination with a plentiful supply of impudence or of good faith.

"I wish to get at the bottom of this matter," said Germain; "and," continued he, suppressing his indignation, "the girl lives in my village. I know her. She can't be far away. Let's ride on together; we shall find her, no doubt."

"You are right," said the farmer; "let's move on; but if we do not find her before we reach the end of this road, I shall give up, for I must turn off toward Ardentes."

"Oh, oh!" thought the peasant, "I shall not part with you, even if I have to follow you around the Devil's Pool for twenty-four hours."

"Stop," said Germain suddenly, fixing his eyes on a clump of broom which waved in a peculiar manner. "Halloa! halloa! Petit-Pierre, is that you, my child?"

The boy recognised his father's voice, and came out from the broom leaping like a young deer; but when he saw Germain in company with the farmer, he stopped dismayed, and stood irresolute.

"Come, my Pierre, come. It is I," cried the husbandman, as he leaped from his horse and ran toward his boy to take him in his arms; "and where is little Marie?"

"She is hiding there, because she is afraid of that dreadful black man, and so am I."

"You needn't be afraid. I am here. Marie, Marie. It is I."

Marie crept toward them, but the moment she saw Germain with the farmer close behind, she sprang forward, and throwing herself into his arms, clung to him as a daughter to her father.

"Oh, my brave Germain!" she cried, "you will defend me. I am not afraid when you are near."

Germain shuddered. He looked at Marie. She was pale; her clothes were torn by the thorns which had scratched her as she passed, rushing toward the brake like a stag chased by the hunters. But neither shame nor despair were in her face.

"Your master wishes to speak to you," said he, his eyes fixed on her features.

"My master!" she exclaimed fiercely; "that man is no master of mine, and he never shall be. You, Germain, you are my master. I want you to take me home with you. I will be your servant for nothing."

The farmer advanced, feigning impatience. "Little girl," said he, "you left something behind at the farm, which I am bringing back to you."

"No, you are not, sir," answered little Marie. "I didn't forget anything, and I have nothing to ask of you."

"Listen a moment," returned the farmer. "It's I who have something to tell you. Come with me. Don't be afraid. It's only a word or two."

"You may say them aloud. I have no secrets with you."

"At any rate, do take your money."

"My money? You owe me nothing, thank God!"

"I suspected as much," said Germain under his breath, "but I don't care, Marie. Listen to what he has to say to you, for—I am curious to know. You can tell me afterward. Go up to his horse. I shall not lose sight of you."

Marie took three steps toward the farmer. He bent over the pommel of his saddle, and lowering his voice he said:

"Little girl, here is a bright golden louis for you. Don't say anything about it; do you hear? I shall say that I found you too frail to work on my farm. There will be no more talk about that. I shall be passing by your house one of these days; and if you have not said anything, I will give you something more; and then if you are more sensible, you have only to speak. I will take you home with me, or I will come at dusk and talk with you in the meadows. What present would you like me to bring you?"

"Here, sir, is the present I have for you," answered little Marie, aloud, as she threw the golden louis in his face with all her might. "I thank you heartily, and I beg that if you come anywhere near our house, you will be good enough to let me know. All the boys in the neighbourhood will go out to welcome you, because, where I live, we are very fond of gentlemen who try to make love to poor girls. You shall see. They will be on the lookout for you."

"You lie with your dirty tongue," cried the farmer, raising his stick with a dangerous air. "You wish to make people believe what is not so, but you shall never get a penny out of me. We know what kind of a girl you are."

Marie drew back, frightened, and Germain sprang to the bridle of the farmer's horse and shook it violently.

"I understand now," said he; "it is easy to see what is going on. Get down, my man, get down; I want to talk to you."

The farmer was not eager to take up the quarrel. Anxious to escape, he set spurs to his horse and tried to loosen the peasant's grasp by striking down his hands with a cane; but Germain dodged the blow, and seizing hold of his antagonist's leg, he unseated him and flung him to the earth. The farmer regained his feet, but although he defended himself vigorously, he was knocked down once more. Germain held him to the ground. Then he said:

"Poor coward, I could thrash you if I wished. But I don't want to do you an injury, and, besides, no amount of punishment would help your conscience—but you shall not stir from this spot until you beg the girl's pardon, on your knees."

The farmer understood this sort of thing, and wished to take it all as a joke. He made believe that his offence was not serious, since it lay in words alone, and protested that he was perfectly willing to ask her pardon, provided he might kiss the girl afterward. Finally, he proposed that they go and drink a pint of wine at the nearest tavern, and so part good friends.

"You are disgusting!" answered Germain, rubbing his victim's head in the dirt, "and I never wish to see your nasty face again. So blush, if you are able, and when you come to our village, you had better slink along Sneak's Alley."[1]

He picked up the farmer's holly-stick, broke it over his knee to show the strength of his wrists, and threw away the pieces with disgust. Then giving one hand to his son and the other to little Marie, he walked away, still trembling with anger.

---

[1] This is the road, which, diverging from the principal street at the entrance of villages, makes a circuit about them. Persons who are in dread of receiving some well-deserved insult, are supposed to take this route to escape attention.

XIV

THE RETURN TO THE FARM

At the end of fifteen minutes they had left the heath behind them. They trotted along the high road, and the grey whinnied at each familiar object. Petit-Pierre told his father as much as he could understand of what had passed.

"When we reached the farm," said he, "*that man* came to speak to my Marie in the fold where we had gone to see the pretty sheep. I had climbed into the manger to play, and *that man* did not see me. Then he said good morning to Marie, and he kissed her."

"You allowed him to kiss you, Marie?" said Germain, trembling with anger.

"I thought it was a civility, a custom of the place to new-comers, just as at your farm the grandmother kisses the young girls who enter her service to show that she adopts them and will be a mother to them."

"And next," went on little Pierre, who was proud to have an adventure to tell of, "*that man* told you something wicked, which you have told me never to repeat and not even remember; so I forgot it right away. Still, if father wishes, I will tell him what it was——"

"No, Pierre, I don't wish to hear, and I don't wish you ever to think of it again."

"Then I will forget it all over again," replied the child. "Next, *that man* seemed to be growing angry because Marie told him that she was going away. He told her he would give her whatever she wanted—a hundred francs! And my Marie grew angry too. Then he came toward her as if he wished to hurt her. I was afraid, and I ran to Marie and cried. Then *that man* said: 'What's that? Where did that child come from? Put it out.' and he raised his cane to beat me. But my Marie prevented him, and she spoke to him this way: 'We will talk later, sir; now I must take this child back to Fourche, and then I shall return.' And as soon as he had left the fold, my Marie spoke to me this way: 'We must run, my Pierre; we must get away as quickly as we can, for this is a wicked man and he is trying to do us harm.' Then when we had gone back of the farmhouses, we crossed a little meadow, and we went to Fourche to find you. But you were not there, and they wouldn't let us wait. And then *that man*, riding his black horse, came behind us, and we ran on as fast as we could and hid in the woods. And then he followed us, and when we heard him coming, we hid again. And then, when he had passed, we began to run toward home, and then you came and found us, and that is how it all happened. I haven't forgotten anything, have I, my Marie?"

"No, my Pierre, that is the whole truth. Now, Germain, you must be my witness, and tell everybody in the village that if I did not stay there it was not from want of courage and industry."

"And, Marie, I want to ask of you whether a man of twenty-eight is too old when there is a woman to be defended and an insult to be revenged. I should like to know whether Bastien or any other pretty boy, ten years better off than I, would not have been knocked to pieces by *that man*, as Petit-Pierre says. What do you think?"

"I think, Germain, that you have done me a great service, and that I shall be grateful all my life."

"Is that all?"

"Little father," said the child, "I forgot to ask little Marie what I promised. I have not had time yet, but I will speak to her at home, and I will speak to my grandmother too."

The child's promise set Germain to thinking. He must explain his conduct to his family and give his objections to the widow Guérin, and all the while conceal the true reasons which had made him so judicious and so decided. When a man is proud and happy, it seems an easy task to thrust his happiness upon others, but to be repulsed on one side and blamed on the other is not a very pleasant position.

Fortunately, Petit-Pierre was fast asleep when they reached the farm, and Germain put him to bed undisturbed. Then he began upon all sorts of explanations. Father Maurice, seated on a three-legged stool before the door, listened with gravity; and, although he was ill-content with the result of the journey, when Germain told him about the widow's systematic coquetry, and demanded of his father-in-law whether he had the time to go and pay his court fifty-two Sundays in the year at the risk of being dismissed in the end, the old man nodded his head in assent and answered: "You were not wrong, Germain; that could never be." And then, when Germain described how he had been obliged to bring back little Marie, with the utmost haste, in order to protect her from the insults or perhaps from the violence of a wicked master, Father Maurice nodded approvingly again and said: "You were not wrong, Germain; that was right."

When Germain had told his story, and had set forth all his reasons, the old farmer and his wife heaved deep, simultaneous sighs of resignation, and looked at each other. Then the head of the house rose and said: "God's will be done. Love can't be made to order."

"Come to supper, Germain," said his mother-in-law. "It is unfortunate that this did not come to a better end, but, after all, it seems that God did not wish it. We must look elsewhere."

"Yes," added the old man, "as my wife says, we must look elsewhere."

There was no more noise at the house, and on the morrow, when Petit-Pierre rose with the larks at dawn, he was no longer excited by the extraordinary events of the preceding days. Like other little peasants of his age, he became indifferent, forgot everything that had been running in his head, and thought only of playing with his brothers, and of pretending to drive the horses and oxen like a man.

Germain plunged into his work, and tried to forget, too; but he became so absent-minded and so sad that everybody noticed it. He never spoke to little Marie, he never even looked at her, and yet had anybody asked him in what meadow she was, or by what road she had passed, there was not a moment in the day when he could not have answered if he would. He dared not ask his family to take her in at the farm during the winter, and yet he knew well how she must suffer from want. But she did not suffer; and Mother Guillette could not understand how her little store of wood never grew less, and how her shed was full in the morning, although she had left it almost empty at night. It was the same with the wheat and potatoes. Somebody entered by the garret window, and emptied a sack on the floor without awaking a soul or leaving a trace of his coming. The widow was at once uneasy and delighted. She made her daughter promise to tell nobody, and said that were people to know of the miracle performed at her house they would take her for a witch. She felt confident that the devil had a share in it, but she was in no hurry to pick a quarrel with him by calling down the priest's exorcisms on the house. It would be time enough, she said, when Satan should come to demand her soul in return for his gifts.

Little Marie understood the truth better, but she dared not speak to Germain, for fear of seeing him return to his dreams of marriage, and, before him, she pretended to perceive nothing.

XV

MOTHER MAURICE

One day, Mother Maurice was alone in the orchard with Germain, and spoke to him kindly:

"My poor son, I believe you are not well. You don't eat as well as usual; you never laugh; you talk less and less. Perhaps one of us, or all of us, have hurt your feelings, without knowing and without wishing it."

"No, my mother," answered Germain, "you have always been as kind to me as the mother who brought me into the world, and I should be very ungrateful if I were to complain of you or your husband, or of anybody in the household."

"Then, my child, it is the sorrow for your wife's death which comes back to you. Instead of growing lighter with time, your grief becomes worse, and as your father has said very wisely, it is absolutely necessary for you to marry again."

"Yes, my mother, that is my opinion, but the women whom you advised me to ask don't suit me. Whenever I see them, instead of forgetting my Catherine, I think of her all the more."

"Apparently that's because we haven't been able to understand your taste. You must help us by telling us the truth. There must be a woman somewhere who is made for you, for God doesn't make anybody without placing his happiness in somebody else. So if you know where to find this woman whom you need, take her, and be she pretty or ugly, young or old, rich or poor, we have made up our minds, my husband and I, to give our consent, for we are tired of seeing you so sad, and we can never be happy while you are sorrowful."

"My mother, you are as kind as the kind Lord, and so is my father," answered Germain; "but your compassion brings small help to my troubles, for the girl I love doesn't care for me."

"She is too young, then? It's foolish for you to love a young girl."

"Yes, mother dear, I have been foolish enough to love a young girl, and it's my fault. I do my best to stop thinking of it, but, working or sleeping, at mass or in bed, with my children or with you, I can think of nothing else."

"Then it's like a fate cast over you, Germain. There's but one remedy, and it is that this girl must change her mind and listen to you. It's my duty to look into this, and see whether it's practicable. Tell me where she lives, and what's her name."

"Oh, my dear mother, I dare not," said Germain, "because you will make fun of me."

"I shall not make fun of you, Germain, because you are in trouble, and I don't wish to make it harder for you. Is it Fanchette?"

"No, mother, of course not."

"Or Rosette?"

"No."

"Tell me, then, for I shall never finish if I must name every girl in the country-side."

Germain bowed his head, and could not bring himself to answer.

"Very good," said Mother Maurice, "I shall let you alone for to-day; to-morrow, perhaps, you will be more confidential with me, or possibly your sister-in-law will question you more cleverly."

And she picked up her basket to go and spread her linen on the bushes.

Germain acted like children who make up their minds when they see that they are no longer attracting attention. He followed his mother, and at length, trembling, he named Marie of Guillette.

Great was the surprise of Mother Maurice. Marie was the last person she would have dreamed of. But she had the delicacy not to cry out, and made her comments to herself. Then seeing that her silence hurt Germain, she stretched out her basket toward him and said:

"Is there any reason for not helping me at my work. Carry this load, and come and talk with me. Have you reflected well, Germain? Are you fully decided?"

"Alas, dear mother, you mustn't speak in that way. I should be decided if I had a chance of success, but as I could never be heard, I have only made up my mind to cure myself, if I can."

"And if you can't."

"There is an end to everything, Mother Maurice: when the horse is laden too heavily, he falls, and when the cow has nothing to eat, she dies."

"Do you mean to say that you will die, if you do not succeed. God grant not, Germain. I don't like to hear a man like you talk of those things; for what he says, he thinks. You are very brave, and weakness is dangerous for strong men. Take heart; I can't conceive that a poverty-stricken girl, whom you have honoured so much as to ask her to marry you, will refuse you."

"Yet it's the truth: she does refuse me."

"And what reasons does she give you?"

"That you have always been kind to her, and that her family owes a great deal to yours, and that she doesn't wish to displease you by turning me away from a rich marriage."

"If she says that, she proves her good sense, and shows what an honest girl she is. But, Germain, she doesn't cure you; for of course she tells you that she loves you and would marry you if we were willing?"

"That's the worst part of all. She says that her heart can never be mine."

"If she says what she doesn't think in order to keep you at a safer distance, the child deserves our love, and we should pass over her youth on account of her great good sense."

"Yes," said Germain, struck by a hope he had never held before; "that would be very wise and right of her! But if she is so sensible, I am sure it is because I displease her."

"Germain," said Mother Maurice, "you must promise me not to worry for a whole week. Keep from tormenting yourself, eat, sleep, and be as gay as you used to be. For my part, I'll speak to my husband, and if I gain his consent, you shall know the girl's real feelings toward you."

Germain promised, and the week passed without a single word in private from Father Maurice, who seemed to suspect nothing. The husbandman did his best to look calm, but he grew ever paler and more troubled.

XVI

LITTLE MARIE

At length, on Sunday morning, when mass was over, his mother-in-law asked Germain what encouragement he had had from his sweetheart since the conversation in the orchard.

"Why, none at all," answered he; "I haven't spoken to her."

"How can you expect to win her if you don't speak to her?"

"I have spoken to her but once," replied Germain. "That was when we were together at Fourche, and since then I haven't said a single word. Her refusal gave me so much pain that I had rather not hear her begin again to tell me that she doesn't love me."

"But, my son, you must speak to her now; your father gives his approval. So make up your mind. I tell you to do it, and, if need be, I shall order you to do it, for you can't rest in this uncertainty."

Germain obeyed. He reached Mother Guillette's house, hanging his head with a hopeless air. Little Marie sat alone before the hearth so thoughtful that she did not hear Germain's step. When she saw him before her, she started from her chair in surprise and grew very red.

"Little Marie," said he, sitting down near her, "I come to trouble you and to give you pain. I know it very well, but the man and his wife at home [it was thus after the peasant fashion that he designated the heads of the house] wish me to speak to you, and beg you to marry me. You don't care for me. I am prepared for it."

"Germain," answered little Marie, "are you sure that you love me?"

"It pains you, I know, but it isn't my fault. If you could change your mind, I should be so very happy, and certain it is that I don't deserve it. Look at me, Marie; am I very terrible?"

"No, Germain," she answered, with a smile, "you are better looking than I."

"Don't make fun of me; look at me charitably; as yet, I have never lost a single hair nor a single tooth. My eyes tell you plainly how much I love you. Look straight into my eyes. It is written there, and every girl knows how to read that writing."

Marie looked into Germain's eyes with playful boldness; then of a sudden she turned away her head and trembled.

"Good God," exclaimed Germain, "I make you afraid; you look at me as though I were the farmer of Ormeaux. Don't be afraid of me, please don't; that hurts me too much. I shall not say any bad words to you, I shall not kiss you if you will not have me, and when you wish me to go away, you have only to show me the door. Must I go in order to stop your trembling?"

Marie held out her hand toward the husbandman, but without turning her head, which was bent on the fireplace, and without saying a word.

"I understand," said Germain. "You pity me, for you are kind; you are sorry to make me unhappy; but you can't love me."

"Why do you say these things to me, Germain?" answered little Marie, after a pause. "Do you wish to make me cry?"

"Poor little girl, you have a kind heart, I know; but you don't love me, and you are hiding your face for fear of letting me see your dislike and your repugnance. And I? I dare not even clasp your hand! In the forest, when my boy was asleep and you were sleeping too, I almost kissed you very gently. But I would have died of shame rather than ask it of you, and that night I suffered as a man burning over a slow fire. Since that time I have dreamed of you every night. Ah! how I have kissed you, Marie! Yet during all that time you have slept without a dream. And now, do you know what I think? I think that were you to turn and look at me with the eyes I have for you, and were you to move your face close to mine, I believe I should fall dead for joy. And you, you think that if such a thing were to happen, you would die of anger and shame!"

Germain spoke as in a dream, not hearing the words he said. Little Marie was trembling all the time, but he was shaking yet more and did not notice it. Of a sudden, she turned. Her eyes were filled with tears, and she looked at him reproachfully. The poor husbandman thought that this was the last blow, and without waiting for his sentence he rose to go, but the girl stopped him, and throwing both her arms about him, she hid her face in his breast.

"Oh, Germain," she sobbed, "didn't you feel that I loved you?"

Then Germain had gone mad, if his son, who came galloping into the cottage on a stick, with his little sister on the crupper, scourging the imaginary steed with a willow branch, had not brought him to his senses. He lifted the boy and placed him in the girl's arms.

"See," said he, "by loving me, you have made more than one person happy."

APPENDIX

I

A COUNTRY WEDDING

HERE ends the history of Germain's marriage as he told it to me himself, good husbandman that he is. I ask your forgiveness, kind reader, that I know not how to translate it better; for it is a real translation that is needed by this old-fashioned and artless language of the peasants of the country "that I sing," as they used to say. These people speak French that is too true for us, and since Rabelais and Montaigne, the advance of the language has lost for us many of its old riches. Thus it is with every advance, and we must make the best of it. Yet it is a pleasure still to hear those picturesque idioms used in the old districts in the centre of France; all the more because it is the genuine expression of the laughing, quiet, and delightfully talkative character of the people who make use of it. Touraine has preserved a certain precious number of patriarchal phrases. But Touraine was civilised greatly during the Renaissance, and since its decline she is filled with fine houses and high roads, with foreigners and traffic. Berry remained as she was, and I think that after Brittany and a few provinces in the far south of France, it is the best preserved district to be found at the present day. Some of the customs are so strange and so curious that I hope to amuse you a few minutes more, kind reader, if you will allow me to describe to you in detail a country wedding—Germain's, for example—at which I had the pleasure of assisting several years ago.

For, alas! everything passes. During my life alone, more change has taken place in the ideas and in the customs of my village than had been seen in the centuries before the Revolution. Already half the ceremonies, Celtic, Pagan, or of the Middle Ages, that in my childhood I have seen in their full vigour, have disappeared. In a year or two more, perhaps, the railroads will lay their level tracks across our deep valleys, and will carry away, with the swiftness of lightning, all our old traditions and our wonderful legends.

It was in winter about the carnival season, the time of year when, in our country, it is fitting and proper to have weddings. In summer the time can hardly be spared, and the work of the farm cannot suffer three days' delay, not to speak of the additional days impaired to a greater or to a less degree by the moral and physical drunkenness which follows a gala-day. I was seated beneath the great mantelpiece of the old-fashioned kitchen fireplace when shots of pistols, barking of dogs, and the piercing notes of the bagpipe told me that the bridal pair were approaching. Very soon Father and Mother Maurice, Germain, and little Marie, followed by Jacques and his wife, the closer relatives, and the godfathers and godmothers of the bride and groom, all made their entry into the yard.

Little Marie had not yet received her wedding-gifts—favours, as they call them—and was dressed in the best of her simple clothes, a dress of dark, heavy cloth, a white fichu with great spots of brilliant colour, an apron of carnation—an Indian red much in vogue at the time, but despised nowadays—a cap of very white muslin after that pattern, happily still preserved, which calls to mind the head-dress of Anne Boleyn and of Agnes Sorrel. She was fresh and laughing, but not at all vain, though she had good reason to be so. Beside her was Germain, serious and tender, like young Jacob greeting Rebecca at the wells of Laban. Another girl would have assumed an important air and struck an attitude of triumph, for in every rank it is something to be married for a fair face alone. Yet the girl's eyes were moist and shone with tenderness. It was plain that she was deep in love and had no time to think of the opinions of others. Her little air of determination was not absent, but everything about her denoted frankness and good-will. There was nothing impertinent in her success, nothing selfish in her sense of power. Never have I seen so lovely a bride, when she answered with frankness her young friends who asked if she were happy:

"Surely I have nothing to complain of the good Lord."

Father Maurice was spokesman. He came forward to pay his compliments, and give the customary invitations. First he fastened to the mantelpiece a branch of laurel decked out with ribbons; this is known as the *writ*—that is to say, the letter of announcement. Next he gave to every guest a tiny cross made of a bit of blue ribbon sewn to a transverse bit of pink ribbon—pink for the bride, blue for the groom. The guests of both sexes were expected to keep this badge to adorn their caps or their button-holes on the wedding-day. This is the letter of invitation, the admission ticket.

Then Father Maurice paid his congratulations. He invited the head of the house and all his *company*—that is to say, all his children, all his friends, and all his servants—to the benediction, *to the feast, to the sports, to the dance, and to everything that follows*. He did not fail to say, "I have come *to do you the honour of inviting you;*" a very right manner of speech, even though it appears to us to convey the wrong meaning, for it expresses the idea of doing honour to those who seem worthy of it.

Despite the generosity of the invitation carried from house to house throughout the parish, politeness, which is very cautious amongst peasants, demands that only two persons from each family take advantage of it—one of the heads of the house, and one from the number of their children.

After the invitations were made, the betrothed couple and their families took dinner together at the farm.

Little Marie kept her three sheep on the common, and Germain tilled the soil as though nothing had happened.

About two in the afternoon before the day set for the wedding, the music came. The music means the players of the bagpipe and hurdy-gurdy, their instruments decorated with long streaming ribbons, playing an appropriate march to a measure which would have been rather slow for feet foreign to the soil, but admirably adapted to the heavy ground and hilly roads of the country.

Pistol-shots, fired by the young people and the children, announced the beginning of the wedding ceremonies. Little by little the guests assembled and danced on the grass-plot before the house in order to enter into the spirit of the occasion. When evening was come they began strange preparations; they divided into two bands, and when night had settled down they proceeded to the ceremony of the *favours*.

All this passed at the dwelling of the bride, Mother Guillette's cottage. Mother Guillette took with her her daughter, a dozen pretty shepherdesses, friends and relatives of her daughter, two or three respectable housewives, talkative neighbours, quick of wit and strict guardians of ancient customs. Next she chose a dozen stout fellows, her relatives and friends; and last of all the parish hemp-dresser, a garrulous old man, and as good a talker as ever there was.

The part which, in Brittany, is played by the bazvalon, the village tailor, is taken in our part of the country by the hemp-dresser and the wool-carder, two professions which are unusually combined in one. He is present at all ceremonies, sad or gay, for he is very learned and a fluent talker, and on these occasions he must always figure as spokesman, in order to fulfil with exactitude certain formalities used from time immemorial. Travelling occupations, which bring a man into the midst of other families, without allowing him to shut himself up within his own, are well fitted to make him talker, wit, story-teller, and singer.

The hemp-dresser is peculiarly sceptical. He and another village functionary, of whom we have spoken before, the grave-digger, are always the daring spirits of the neighbourhood. They have talked so much about ghosts, and they know so well all the tricks of which these malicious spirits are capable, that they fear them scarcely at all. It is especially at night that all of them—grave-diggers, hemp-dressers, and ghosts—do their work. It is also at night when the hemp-dresser tells his melancholy stories. Permit me to make a digression.

When the hemp has reached the right stage, that is to say, when it has been steeped sufficiently in running water, and half dried on the bank, it is brought into the yard and arranged in little upright sheaves, which, with their stalks divided at the base, and their heads bound in balls, bear in the dusk some small resemblance to a long procession of little white phantoms, standing on their slender legs, and moving noiselessly along the wall.

It is at the end of September, when the nights are still warm, that they begin to beat it by the pale light of the moon. By day the hemp has been heated in the oven; at night they take it out to beat it while it is still hot. For this they use a kind of horse surmounted by a wooden lever which falls into grooves and breaks the plant without cutting it. It is then that you hear in the night that sudden, sharp noise of three blows in quick succession. Then there is silence; it is the movement of the arm drawing out the handful of hemp to break it in a fresh spot. The three blows begin again; the other arm works the lever, and thus it goes on until the moon is hidden by the early streaks of dawn. As the work continues but a few days in the year, the dogs are not accustomed to it, and yelp their plaintive howls toward every point of the horizon.

It is the time of unwonted and mysterious sounds in the country. The migrating cranes fly so high that by day they are scarcely visible. By night they are only heard, and their hoarse wailing voices, lost in the clouds, sound like the parting cry of souls in torment, striving to find the road to heaven, yet forced by an unconquerable fate to wander near the earth about the haunts of men; for these errant birds have strange uncertainties, and many a mysterious anxiety in the course of their airy flight. Sometimes they lose the wind when the capricious gusts battle, or come and go in the upper regions. When this confusion comes by day, you can see the leader of the file fluttering aimlessly in the air, then turn about and take his place at the tail of the triangular phalanx, while a skilful manœuvre of his companions forms them soon in good order behind him. Often, after vain efforts, the exhausted leader relinquishes the guidance of the caravan; another comes forward, tries in his turn, and yields his place to a third, who finds the breeze, and continues the march in triumph. But what cries, what reproaches, what protests, what wild curses or anxious questionings are exchanged in an unknown tongue amongst these winged pilgrims!

Sometimes, in the resonant night, you can hear these sinister noises whirling for a long time above the housetops, and as you can see nothing, you feel, despite your efforts, a kind of dread and kindred discomfort, until the sobbing multitude is lost in boundless space.

There are other noises too which belong to this time of year, and which sound usually in the orchards. Gathering the fruit is not yet over, and the thousand unaccustomed cracklings make the tree seem alive. A branch groans as it bends beneath a burden which has reached, of a sudden, the last stage of growth; or perhaps an apple breaks from the twig, and falls on the damp earth at your feet with a dull sound. Then you hear rush by, brushing the branches and the grass, a creature you cannot see; it is the peasant's dog, that prowling and uneasy rover, at once impudent and cowardly, always wandering, never sleeping, ever seeking you know not what, spying upon you, hiding in the brush, and taking flight at the sound of a falling apple, which he things a stone that you are throwing at him.

It is during those nights, nights misty and grey, that the hemp-dresser tells his weird stories of will-o'-the-wisps and milk-white hares, of souls in torment and wizards changed to wolves, of witches' vigils at the cross-roads, and screech-owls, prophetesses of the graveyard. I remember passing the early hours of such a night while the hemp-dressing was going on, and the pitiless strokes, interrupting the dresser's story at its most awful place, sent icy shivers through our veins. And often too the good man continued his story as he worked, and four or five words were lost, terrible words, no doubt, which we dared not make him repeat, and whose omission added a mystery yet more fearful to the dark mysteries of the story which had gone before. It was in vain the servants warned us that it was too late to stay without doors, and that bedtime had sounded for us long since; they too were dying to hear more; and then with what terror we crossed the hamlet on our way home! How deep did the church porch appear to us, and how thick and black the shadows of the old trees! The graveyard we dared not see; we shut our eyes tight as we passed it.

But no more than the sacristan is the hemp-dresser gifted solely with the desire of frightening; he loves to make people laugh; he is sarcastic and sentimental at need, when love and marriage are to be sung. It is he who collects and keeps stored in his memory the oldest songs, and who transmits them to posterity. And so it is he who acts at weddings the part we shall see him play at the presentation of little Marie's favours.

II

THE WEDDING FAVOURS

When all the guests were met together in the house, the doors and windows were closed with the utmost care; even the garret window was barricaded; boards and benches, logs and tables were placed behind every entrance, just as if the inhabitants were making ready to sustain a siege; and within these fortifications solemn stillness prevailed until at a distance were heard songs and laughter and the sounds of rustic music. It was the band of the bridegroom, Germain at the head, followed by his most trusty companions and by the grave-digger, relatives, friends, and servants, who formed a compact and merry train. Meanwhile, as they came nearer the house they slackened their pace, held a council of war, and became silent. The girls, shut up in the house, had arranged little loop-holes at the windows by which they could see the enemy approach and deploy in battle array. A fine, cold rain was falling, which added zest to the situation, while a great fire blazed on the hearth within. Marie wished to cut short the inevitable slowness of this well-ordered siege; she had no desire to see her lover catch cold, but not being in authority she had to take an ostensible share in the mischievous cruelty of her companions.

When the two armies met, a discharge of fire-arms on the part of the besiegers set all the dogs in the neighbourhood to barking. Those within the house dashed at the door with loud yelps, thinking that the attack was in earnest, and the children, little reassured by the efforts of their mothers, began to weep and to tremble. The whole scene was played so well that a stranger would have been deceived, and would have made his preparations to fight a band of brigands. Then the grave-digger, bard and orator of the groom, took his stand before the door, and with a rueful voice exchanged the following dialogue with the hemp-dresser, who was stationed above the same door:

The Grave-digger: "Ah, my good people, my fellow-townsmen, for the love of Heaven, open the door."

The Hemp-dresser: "Who are you, and what right have you to call us your dear fellow-townsmen? We don't know you."

The Grave-digger: "We are worthy folk in great distress. Don't be afraid of us, my friends. Extend us your hospitality. Sleet is falling; our poor feet are frozen, and our journey home has been so long that our sabots are split."

The Hemp-dresser: "If your sabots are split, you can look on the ground; you will find very soon a sprig of willow to make some *arcelets* [small curved blades of iron which are fastened on split sabots to hold them together]."

The Grave-digger: "Willow *arcelets* are scarcely strong enough. You are making fun of us, good people, and you would do better to open your doors. We can see a splendid fire blazing in your dwelling. The spit must be turning, and we can make merry with you, heart and belly. So open your doors to poor pilgrims who will die on the threshold if you are not merciful."

The Hemp-dresser: "Ah ha! so you are pilgrims? You never told us that. And what pilgrimage do you come from, may I ask?"

The Grave-digger: "We shall tell you that when you open the door, for we come from so far that you would never believe it."

The Hemp-dresser: "Open the door to you? I rather think not. We can't trust you. Tell us, is it from Saint Sylvain of Pouligny that you come?"

The Grave-digger: "We have been at Saint Sylvain of Pouligny, but we have been farther still."

The Hemp-dresser: "Then you have been as far as Saint Solange?"

The Grave-digger: "At Saint Solange we have been, sure enough, but we have been farther yet."

The Hemp-dresser: "You are lying. You have never been as far as Saint Solange."

The Grave-digger: "We have been farther, for now we are come from Saint Jacques of Compostelle."

The Hemp-dresser: "What absurdity are you telling us? We don't know that parish. We can easily see that you are bad people, brigands, nobodies, and liars. Go away with your nonsense. We are on our guard. You can't come in."

The Grave-digger: "Ah, my poor fellow, take pity on us. We are not pilgrims, as you have guessed, but we are unlucky poachers pursued by the keepers. Even the police are after us, and if you don't hide us in your hay-loft, we shall be taken and led off to prison."

The Hemp-dresser: "And who will prove you are what you say you are, this time? For you have told us one lie already that you can't maintain."

The Grave-digger: "If you will let us in, we shall show you a pretty piece of game we have killed."

The Hemp-dresser: "Show it right away, for we have our suspicions."

The Grave-digger: "All right, open the door or a window to let us pass the creature in."

The Hemp-dresser: "Oh, no, not quite so foolish. I am looking at you through a little chink, and I can see neither hunters nor game amongst you."

Here an ox-driver, a thick-set fellow of herculean strength, detached himself from a group where he had stood unperceived, and raised toward the window a plucked goose, spitted on a strong iron bar decorated with tufts of straw and ribbons.

"Ho, ho!" cried the hemp-dresser, after cautiously extending an arm to feel the roast. "That isn't a quail nor a partridge; it isn't a hare nor a rabbit; it's something like a goose or a turkey. Upon my word you're clever hunters, and that game didn't make you run very far. Move on, you rogues; we know all your lies, and you had best go home and cook your supper. You are not going to eat ours."

The Grave-digger: "O Heavens, where can we go to cook our game? It is very little for so many as we, and, besides, we have neither place nor fire. At this time every door is closed, and every soul asleep. You are the only people who are celebrating a wedding at home, and you must be hard-hearted indeed to let us freeze outside. Once again, good people, open the door; we shall not cost you anything. You can see that we bring our own meat; only a little room at your hearth, a little blaze to cook with, and we shall go on our way rejoicing."

The Hemp-dresser: "Do you suppose that we have too much room here, and that wood is bought for nothing?"

The Grave-digger: "We have here a small bundle of hay to make the fire. We shall be satisfied with that; only grant us leave to place the spit across your fireplace."

The Hemp-dresser: "That will never do. We are disgusted, and don't pity you at all. It is my opinion that you are drunk, that you need nothing, and that you only wish to come in and steal away our fire and our daughters."

The Grave-digger: "Since you won't listen to reason, we shall make our way in by force."

The Hemp-dresser: "Try, if you want; we are shut in well enough to have no fear of you, and since you are impudent fellows, we shall not answer you again."

Thereupon the hemp-dresser shut the garret window with a bang, and came down into the room below by a step-ladder. Then he took the bride by the hand, the young people of both sexes followed, and they all began to sing and chatter merrily, while the matrons sang in piercing voices, and shrieked with laughter in derision and bravado at those without who were attempting an attack.

The besiegers, on their side, made a great hubbub. They discharged their pistols at the doors, made the dogs growl, whacked the walls, shook the blinds, and uttered frightful shrieks. In short, there was such a pandemonium that nobody could hear, and such a cloud of dust that nobody could see.

And yet this attack was all a sham. The time had not come for breaking through the etiquette. If, in prowling about, anybody were to find an unguarded aperture, or any opening whatsoever, he might try to slip in unobserved, and then, if the carrier of the spit succeeded in placing his roast before the fire, and thus prove the capture of the hearth, the comedy was over and the bridegroom had conquered.

The entrances of the house, however, were not numerous enough for any to be neglected in the customary precautions, and nobody might use violence before the moment fixed for the struggle.

When they were weary of dancing and screams, the hemp-dresser began to think of capitulation. He went up to his window, opened it with precaution, and greeted the baffled assailants with a burst of laughter.

"Well, my boys," said he, "you look very sheep-faced. You thought there was nothing easier than to come in, and you see that our defence is good. But we are beginning to have pity on you, if you will submit and accept our conditions."

The Grave-digger: "Speak, good people. Tell us what we must do to approach your hearth."

The Hemp-dresser: "You must sing, my friends; but sing a song we don't know—one that we can't answer by a better."

"That's not hard to do," answered the grave-digger, and he thundered in a powerful voice:

"'Six months ago, 'twas in the spring . . .'"

"'I wandered through the sprouting grass,'" answered the hemp-dresser in a slightly hoarse but terrible voice. "You must be jesting, my poor friends, singing us such time-worn songs. You see very well that we can stop you at the first word."

"'She was a prince's daughter . . .'"

"'Right gladly would she wed,'"

answered the hemp-dresser. "Come, move on to the next we know that a little too well."

The Grave-digger : "How do you like this one?—

"'As I was journeying home from Nantes'"

The Hemp-dresser :

"'Weary, oh, weary, was I, was I.'"

"That dates from my grandmother's time. Let's have another."

The Grave-digger :

"'One day I went a-walking . . .'"

The Hemp-dresser :

"'Along a lovely wood!'"

"That one is too stupid! Our little children wouldn't take the trouble to answer you. What! Are these all you know?"

The Grave-digger : "Oh, we shall sing you so many that you will never be able to hear them all."

In this way a full hour passed. As the two antagonists were champions of the country round in the matter of songs, and as their store seemed inexhaustible, the contest might last all night with ease, all the more because the hemp-dresser, with a touch of malice, allowed several ballads of ten, twenty, or thirty couplets to be sung through, feigning by his silence to admit his defeat. Then the bridegroom's camp rejoiced and sang aloud in chorus, and thought that this time the foe was worsted; but at the first line of the last couplet, they heard the hoarse croaking of the old hemp-dresser bellow forth the second rhyme. Then he cried:

"You need not tire yourselves by singing such a long one, my children—we know that one to our finger-tips."

Once or twice, however, the hemp-dresser made a wry face, contracted his brow, and turned toward the expectant housewives with a baffled air. The grave-digger was singing something so old that his adversary had forgotten it, or perhaps had never even heard it; but instantly the good gossips chanted the victorious refrain through their noses with voices shrill as a sea-mew's, and the grave-digger, forced to surrender, went on to fresh attempts.

It would have taken too long to wait for a decision of the victory. The bride's party declared itself disposed to be merciful, provided that the bride were given a present worthy of her.

Then began the song of the favours to a tune solemn as a church chant.

The men without sang together in bass voices:

"'Open the door, true love,
Open the door;
have presents for you, love,
Oh, say not adieu, love.'"

To this the women answered from within in falsetto, with mournful voices:

"'My father is sorry, my mother is sad,
And I am a maiden too kind by far
At such an hour my gate to unbar.'"

The men took up the first verse as far as the fourth line and modified it thus:

"'And a handkerchief new, love.'"

But, on behalf of the bride, the women answered in the same way as at first.

For twenty couplets, at least, the men enumerated all the wedding-presents, always mentioning something new in the last line: a handsome apron, pretty ribbons, a cloth dress, laces, a golden cross, and even a hundred pins to complete the modest list of wedding-presents. The refusal of the women could not be shaken, but at length the men decided to speak of

"A good husband, too, love."

And the women answered, turning toward the bride and singing in unison with the men:

"'Open the door, true love,
Open the door;
Here's a sweetheart for you, love,
Pray let us enter, too, love.'"

III

THE WEDDING

IMMEDIATELY the hemp-dresser drew back the wooden bolt which barred the door within. At this time it was still the only fastening known in most of the dwellings of our hamlet. The groom's band burst into the bride's house, but not without a struggle; for the young men quartered within, and even the old hemp-dresser and the gossips, made it their duty to defend the hearth. The spit-bearer, upheld by his supporters, had to plant the roast before the fireplace. It was a regular battle, although people abstained from striking, and there was no anger shown in this struggle. But everybody was pushing and shoving so hard, and there was so much playful pride in this display of muscular strength, that the results might well have been serious, although they did not appear so across the laughs and songs. The poor old hemp-dresser, fighting like a lion, was pinned to the wall and squeezed by the crowd until his breath almost left him. More than one champion was upset and trodden under foot involuntarily; more than one hand, jammed against the spit, was covered with blood. These games are dangerous, and latterly the accidents have been so severe that our peasants have determined to allow the ceremony of the favours to fall into disuse; I believe we saw the last at the marriage of François Meillant, although there was no real struggle on that occasion.

The battle was earnest enough, however, at Germain's wedding. It was a point of honour on one side to invade, on the other to defend, Mother Guillette's hearth. The great spit was twisted like a screw beneath the strong fists which fought for it. A pistol-shot set fire to a small quantity of hemp arranged in sheaves and laid on a wicker shelf near the ceiling. This incident created a diversion, and while some of the company crowded about to extinguish the sparks, the grave-digger, who had climbed unbeknown into the garret, came down the chimney and seized the spit, at the very moment when the ox-driver, who was defending it near the hearth, raised it above his head to prevent it from being torn away. Some time before the attack, the women had taken the precaution to put out the fire lest in the struggle somebody should fall in and get burned. The jocular grave-digger, in league with the ox-driver, grasped the trophy and tossed it easily across the andirons. It was done! Nobody might interfere. The grave-digger sprang to the middle of the room and lighted a few wisps of straw, which he placed about the spit under pretence of cooking the roast, for the goose was in pieces and the floor was strewn with its scattered fragments.

Then there was a great deal of laughter and much boastful dispute. Everybody showed the marks of the blows he had received, and as it was often a friend's hand that had struck them, there was no word of complaint nor of quarrelling. The hemp-dresser, half flattened out, kept rubbing the small of his back and saying that, although it made small difference to him, he protested against the ruse of his friend, the grave-digger, and that if he had not been half dead, the hearth had never been captured so easily. The women swept the floor and order was restored. The table was covered with jugs of new wine. When the contestants had drunk together and taken breath, the bridegroom was led to the middle of the chamber, and, armed with a wand, he was obliged to submit to a fresh trial.

During the struggle, the bride and three of her companions had been hidden by her mother, godmother, and aunts, who had made the four girls sit down in a remote corner of the room while they covered them with a large white cloth. Three friends of Marie's height, with caps of a uniform size, were chosen, so that when they were enveloped from head to toe by the cloth it was impossible to tell them apart.

The bridegroom might not touch them, except with the tip of his staff, and then merely to designate which he thought to be his wife. They allowed him time enough to make an examination with no other help than his eyes afforded, and the women, placed on either side, kept zealous watch lest cheating should occur. Should he guess wrong, he might not dance with his bride, but only with her he had chosen by mistake.

When Germain stood in front of these ghosts wrapped in the same shroud, he feared he should make a wrong choice; and, in truth, that had happened to many another, so carefully and conscientiously were the precautions made. His heart beat loud. Little Marie did her best to breathe hard and shake the cloth a little, but her malicious companions followed her example, and kept poking the cloth with their fingers, so that there was as many mysterious signals as there were girls beneath the canopy. The square head-dresses upheld the cloth so evenly that it was impossible to discern the contour of a brow outlined by its folds.

After ten minutes' hesitation, Germain shut his eyes, commended his soul to God, and stretched out the wand at random. It touched the forehead of little Marie, who cast the cloth from her, and shouted with triumph. Then it was his right to kiss her, and lifting her in his strong arms, he bore her to the middle of the room, where together they opened the dance, which lasted until two in the morning. The company separated to meet again at eight. As many people had come from the country round, and as there were not beds enough for everybody, each of the village maidens took to her bed two or three other girls, while the men spread themselves pell-mell on the hay in the barn-loft. You can imagine well that they had little sleep, for they did nothing but wrestle and joke, and tell foolish stories. Properly, there were three sleepless nights at weddings, and these we cannot regret.

At the time appointed for departure, when they had partaken of milk-soup, seasoned with a strong dose of pepper to stimulate the appetite — for the wedding-feast gave promise of great bounty—the guests assembled in the farm-yard. Since our parish had been abolished, we had to go half a league from home to receive the marriage blessing. It was cool and pleasant weather, but the roads were in such wretched condition that everybody was on horseback, and each man took a companion on his crupper, whether she were young or old. Germain started on the grey, and the mare, well-groomed, freshly shod, and decked out with ribbons, pranced about and snorted fire from her nostrils. The husbandman went to the cottage for his bride in company with his brother-in-law, Jacques, who rode the old grey, and carried Mother Guillette on the crupper, while Germain returned to the farm-yard in triumph, holding his dear little wife before him.

Then the merry cavalcade set out, escorted by the children, who ran ahead and fired off their pistols to make the horses jump. Mother Maurice was seated in a small cart, with Germain's three children and the fiddlers. They led the march to the sound of their instruments. Petit-Pierre was so handsome that his old grandmother was pride itself. But the eager child did not stay long at her side. During a moment's halt made on the journey, before passing through a difficult piece of road, he slipped away and ran to beg his father to carry him in front on the grey.

"No, no," replied Germain, "that will call forth some disagreeable joke; we mustn't do it."

"It's little that I care what the people of Saint Chartier say," said little Marie. "Take him up, Germain, please do; I shall be prouder of him than I am of my wedding-gown."

Germain yielded, and the pretty trio darted into the crowd borne by the triumphant gallop of the grey.

And so it was; the people of Saint Chartier, although they were very sarcastic, and somewhat disdainful of the neighbouring parishes which had been annexed to theirs, never thought of laughing when they saw such a handsome husband, such a lovely wife, and a child that a king's wife might court. Petit-Pierre was all dressed in light blue cloth, with a smart red waistcoat so short that it descended scarcely below his chin. The village tailor had fitted his armholes so tight that he could not bring his two little hands together. But, oh, how proud he was! He wore a round hat, with a black-and-gold cord, and a peacock's plume which stuck out proudly from a tuft of guinea feathers. A bunch of flowers, bigger than his head, covered his shoulder, and ribbons fluttered to his feet. The hemp-dresser, who was also the barber and hair-dresser of the district, had cut his hair evenly, by covering his head with a bowl, and clipping off the protruding locks, an infallible method for guiding the shears. Thus arrayed, the poor child was less poetic, certainly, than with his curls streaming in the wind, and his Saint John Baptist's sheepskin about him; but he knew nothing of this, and everybody admired him and said that he had quite the air of a little man. His beauty triumphed over everything, for what is there over which the exceeding beauty of childhood could not triumph?

His little sister, Solange, had, for the first time in her life, a peasant's cap in place of the calico hood which little girls wear until they are two or three years old. And what a cap it was! Longer and larger than the poor little thing's whole body. How beautiful she thought it! She dared not even turn her head; so she kept quite still and thought the people would take her for the bride.

As for little Sylvain, he was still in long clothes, and, fast asleep on his grandmother's knees, he did not even know what a wedding was.

Germain looked at his children tenderly, and when they reached the town hall, he said to his bride:

"Marie, I have come here with a happier heart than I had the day when I brought you home from the forest of Chanteloube, thinking that you could never love me. I took you in my arms to put you on the ground as I do here; but I thought that never again should we be mounted on the good grey with the child on our knees. I love you so dearly, I love these little creatures so dearly, I am so happy that you love me and that you love them, and that my family love you, and I love your mother so well and all my friends so well, and everybody else so well to-day, that I wish I had three or four hearts to fill all of them; for surely one is too small to hold so much love and so much happiness. It almost makes my stomach ache."

There was a crowd at the door of the town hall and another at the church to see the pretty bride. Why should we not tell about her dress? it became her so well. Her muslin cap, without spot and covered with embroidery, had lappets trimmed with lace. At that time peasant women never allowed a single lock to be seen, and, although they conceal beneath their caps splendid coils of hair tied up with tape to hold the coif in place, even to-day it would be thought a scandal and a shame for them to show themselves bareheaded to men. Nowadays, however, they allow a slender braid to appear over their foreheads, and this improves their appearance very much. Yet I regret the classic head-dress of my time; its spotless laces next the bare skin gave an effect of pristine purity which seemed to me very solemn; and when a face looked beautiful thus, it was with a beauty of which nothing can express the charm and unaffected majesty.

Little Marie wore her cap thus, and her forehead was so white and so pure that it defied the whiteness of linen to cast it in the shade. Although she had not closed an eye the night before, the morning air and, yet more, the joy within of a soul pure as the heaven, and, more than all, a small secret flame guarded with the modesty of girlhood, caused a bloom to mount to her cheeks delicate as the peach-blossom in the first beams of an April sun.

Her white scarf, modestly crossed over her breast, left visible only the soft curves of a neck rounded like a turtle-dove's; her home-made cloth gown of myrtle-green outlined her pretty figure, which looked already perfect, yet which must still grow and develop, for she was but seventeen. She wore an apron of violet silk with the bib our peasant women were so foolish as to suppress, which added so much elegance and decency to the breast. Nowadays they display their scarfs more proudly, but there is no longer in their dress that delicate flower of the purity of long ago, which made them look like Holbein's virgins. They are more forward and more profuse in their courtesies. The good old custom used to be a kind of staid reserve which made their rare smile deeper and more ideal.

During the offertory, after the fashion of the day, Germain placed the "thirteen"—that is to say, thirteen pieces of silver—in his bride's hand. He slipped over her finger a silver ring of a form unchanged for centuries, but which is replaced for henceforth by the golden wedding-ring. As they walked out of church, Marie said in a low voice:

"Is this really the ring I wanted? Is it the one I asked you for, Germain?"

"Yes," answered he, "my Catherine wore it on her finger when she died. There is but one ring for both my weddings."

"Thank you, Germain," said the young woman, in a serious and impressive tone. "I shall die with it on, and if I go before you, you must keep it for the marriage of your little Solange."

IV

THE CABBAGE

THEY mounted and returned very quickly to Belair. The feast was bountiful, and, mingled with songs and dances, it lasted until midnight. For fourteen hours the old people did not leave the table. The grave-digger did the cooking, and did it very well. He was celebrated for this, and he would leave his fire to come in and dance and sing before and after every course. And yet this poor Father Bontemps was epileptic. Who would have thought it? He was fresh and strong, and merry as a young man. One day we found him in a ditch, struck down by his malady at nightfall. We carried him home with us, in a wheelbarrow, and we spent all night in caring for him. Three days afterward, he was at a wedding, singing like a thrush, jumping like a kid, and bustling about after his old fashion. When he left a marriage, he would go to dig a grave and nail up a coffin. Then he would become very grave, and though nothing of this appeared in his gay humour, it left a melancholy impression which hastened the return of his attacks. His wife was paralysed, and had not stirred from her chair for twenty years. His mother is living yet, at a hundred and forty, but he, poor man, so happy and good and amusing, was killed last year by falling from his loft to the sidewalk. Doubtless he died a victim to a fatal attack of his disease, and, as was his habit, had hidden in the hay, so as not to frighten and distress his family. In this tragic manner he ended a life strange as his disposition—a medley of things sad and mad, awful and gay; and, in the midst of all, his heart was ever good and his nature kind.

Now we come to the third day of the wedding, the most curious of all, which is kept to-day in all its vigour. We shall not speak of the roast which they carry to the bridal bed; it is a very silly custom, and hurts the self-respect of the bride, while it tends to ruin the modesty of the attendant girls. Besides, I believe that it is practised in all the provinces, and does not belong peculiarly to our own.

Just as the ceremony of the wedding favours is a symbol that the heart and home of the bride are won, that of the cabbage is a symbol of the fruitfulness of marriage. When breakfast is over on the day after the wedding, this fantastic representation begins. Originally of Gallic derivation, it has passed through primitive Christianity, and little by little it has become a kind of mystery, or droll morality-play of the Middle Ages.

Two boys, the merriest and most intelligent of the company, disappear from breakfast, and after costuming themselves, return escorted by dogs, children, and pistol-shots. They represent a pair of beggars — husband and wife — dressed in rags. The husband is the filthier of the two; it is vice which has brought him so low; the wife is unhappy and degraded only through the misdeeds of her husband.

They are called the gardener and the gardener's wife, and they pretend it is their duty to guard and care for the sacred cabbage. The husband has several names, each with a meaning. Sometimes they call him the "scarecrow," because his head is covered with straw or hemp, and because his legs and a portion of his body are surrounded with straw to hide his nakedness, ill concealed by his rags. He has also a great belly, or hump, constructed of straw or hay underneath his blouse. Then he is known as the "ragamuffin," on account of his covering of rags. Lastly he is termed the "infidel," and this is most significant of all, because by his cynicism and his debauchery he is supposed to typify the opposite of every Christian virtue.

He comes with his face all smeared with soot and the lees of wine, and sometimes made yet more hideous by a grotesque mask. An earthenware cup, notched and broken, or an old sabot attached to his girdle by a cord, shows that he has come to beg for alms of wine. Nobody refuses him, and he pretends to drink; then he pours the wine on the ground by way of libation. At every step he falls, rolls in the mud, and feigns to be a prey to the most shameful drunkenness. His poor wife runs after him, picks him up, calls for help, arranges his hempen locks, which struggle forth in unkempt wisps from beneath his filthy hat, sheds tears over her husband's degradation, and pours forth pathetic reproaches.

"Wretched man," she cries, "see the misery to which your wickedness has brought us. I have to spend all my time sewing and working for you, mending your clothes. You tear and bedraggle yourself incessantly. You have eaten up all my little property; our six children lie on straw, and we are living in a stable with the beasts. Here we are forced to beg for alms, and, besides, you are so ugly and vile and despicable that very soon they will be tossing us bread as if we were dogs. Ah, my poor people, take pity on us! Take pity on me! I haven't deserved my lot, and never had woman a more dirty and detestable husband. Help me to pick him up, else the waggons will run over him as they run over broken bottles, and I shall be a widow, and that will end by killing me with grief, though all the world says it would be an excellent riddance for me."

Such is the part of the gardener's wife, and her continued lamentations last during the entire play. For it is a genuine spontaneous comedy acted on the spur of the moment in the open air, along the roads and across the fields, aided by every chance occurrence that presents itself. Everybody shares in the acting, people within the wedding-party and people without, wayfarers and dwellers in houses, for three or four hours of the day, as we shall see. The theme is always the same, but the variations are infinite; and it is here that we can see the instinct of mimicry, the abundance of droll ideas, the fluency, the wit at repartee, and even the natural eloquence of our peasants.

The rôle of gardener's wife is intrusted commonly to a slender man, beardless and fresh of face, who can give a great appearance of truth to his personification and plays the burlesque despair naturally enough to make people sad and glad at once, as they are in real life. These thin, beardless men are not rare among us, and, strangely enough, they are sometimes most remarkable for their muscular strength.

When the wife's misfortunes have been explained, the young men of the company try to persuade her to leave her drunken husband and to amuse herself with them. They offer her their arms and drag her away. Little by little she gives way; her spirits rise, and she begins to run about, first with one and then with another, and grows more scandalous in her behaviour: a fresh "morality;" the ill-conduct of the husband excites and aggravates the evil in the wife.

Then the "infidel" wakes from his drunkenness. He looks about for his companion, arms himself with a rope and a stick, and rushes after her. They make him run, they hide, they pass the wife from one to another, they try to divert her attention and to deceive her jealous spouse. His friends try to get him drunk. At length he catches his unfaithful wife, and wishes to beat her. What is truest and most carefully portrayed in this play is that the jealous husband never attacks the men who carry off his wife. He is very polite and prudent with them, and wishes only to take vengeance on the sinning woman, because she is supposed to be too feeble to offer resistance.

At the moment, however, when he raises his stick and prepares his cord to strike the delinquent, all the men in the party interpose and throw themselves between husband and wife.

"Don't strike her! Never strike your wife," is the formula repeated to satiety during these scenes. They disarm the husband, and force him to pardon and to kiss his wife, and soon he pretends to love her better than ever. He walks along, his arm linked in hers, singing and dancing until, in a new access of drunkenness, he rolls upon the ground, and then begin all over again the lamentations of the wife, her discouragements, her pretended unfaithfulness, her husband's jealousy, the interference of the neighbours, and the reconciliation. In all this there is a simple and even coarse lesson, which, though it savours strongly of its Middle-Age origin, does not fail to fix its impression if not on the married folk, who are too loving or too sensible to have need of it, at least upon the children and the young people. The "infidel," racing after young girls and pretending to wish to kiss them, frightens and disgusts them to such a degree that they fly in unaffected terror. His dirty face and his great stick, harmless as it is, make the children shriek aloud. It is the comedy of customs in their most elementary but their most striking state.

When this farce is well under way, people make ready to hunt for the cabbage. They bring a stretcher and place upon it the "infidel," armed with a spade, a cord, and a large basket. Four powerful men raise him on their shoulders. His wife follows on foot, and after her come the "elders" in a body with serious and thoughtful looks; then the wedding-march begins by couples to a step tuned to music. Pistol-shots begin anew, and dogs bark louder than ever at the sight of the filthy "infidel" borne aloft in triumph. The children swing incense in derision with sabots fastened at the end of a cord.

But why this ovation to an object so repulsive? They are marching to the capture of the sacred cabbage, emblem of the fruitfulness of marriage, and it is this drunkard alone who can bear the symbolic plant in his hand. Doubtless, there is in it a pre-Christian mystery which recalls the Saturnalian feasts or some rout of the Bacchanals. Perhaps this "infidel," who is, at the same time, pre-eminently a gardener, is none other than Priapus himself, god of gardens and of drunkenness, a divinity who must have been pure and serious in his origin as is the mystery of birth, but who has been degraded bit by bit through licence of manners and distraction of thought.

However this may be, the triumphal procession arrives at the bride's house, and enters the garden. Then they select the choicest cabbage, and this is not done very quickly, for the old people keep consulting and disputing interminably, each one pleading for the cabbage he thinks most suitable. They put it to vote, and when the choice is made the gardener fastens his cord to the stalk, and moves away as far as the size of the garden permits. The gardener's wife takes care that the sacred vegetable shall not be hurt in its fall. The wits of the wedding, the hemp-dresser, the grave-digger, the carpenter, and the sabot-maker, form a ring about the cabbage, for men who do not till the soil, but pass their lives in other people's houses, are thought to be, and are really, wittier and more talkative than simple farm-hands. One digs, with a spade, a ditch deep enough to uproot an oak. Another places on his nose a pair of wooden or cardboard spectacles. He fulfils the duties of "engineer," walks up and down, constructs a plan, stares at the workmen through his glasses, plays the pedant, cries out that everything will be spoiled, has the work stopped and begun afresh as his fancy directs, and makes the whole performance as long and ridiculous as he can. This is an addition to the formula of an ancient ceremony held in mockery of theorists in general, for peasants despise them royally, or from hatred of the surveyors who decide boundaries and regulate taxes, or of the workmen employed on bridges and causeways, who transform commons into highways, and suppress old abuses which the peasants love. Be this as it may, this character in the comedy is called the "geometrician," and does his best to make himself unbearable to those who are toiling with pickaxe and shovel.

After a quarter of an hour spent in mummery, and difficulties raised in order to avoid cutting the roots, and to transplant the cabbage without injury, while shovelfuls of dirt are tossed into the faces of the onlookers—so much the worse for him who does not retreat in time, for were he bishop or prince he must receive the baptism of earth—the " infidel " pulls the rope, the " infidel's wife " holds her apron, and the cabbage falls majestically amidst the applause of the spectators. Then a basket is brought, and the " infidel " pair plant the cabbage therein with every care and precaution. They surround it with fresh earth, and support it with sticks and strings, such as city florists use for their splendid potted camellias; they fix red apples to the points of the sticks, and twist sprigs of thyme, sage, and laurel all about them; they bedeck the whole with ribbons and streamers; they place the trophy upon the stretcher with the " infidel," whose duty it is to maintain its equilibrium and preserve it from harm; and, at length, they move away from the garden in good order and in marching step.

But when they are about to pass the gate, and again when they enter the yard of the bridegroom's house, an imaginary obstacle blocks the way. The bearers of the burden stagger, utter loud cries, retreat, advance once more, and, as though crushed by a resistless force, they pretend to sink beneath its weight. While this is going on, the bystanders shout loudly, exciting and steadying this human team.

" Slowly, slowly, my child. There, there, courage! Look out! Be patient! Lower your head; the door is too low! Close up; it's too narrow! A little more to the left; now to the right; on with you; don't be afraid; you're almost there."

Thus it is that in years of plentiful harvest, the ox-cart, loaded to overflowing with hay or corn, is too broad or too high to enter the barn door. Thus it is that the driver shouts at the strong beasts, to restrain them or to urge them on; thus it is that with skill and mighty efforts they force this mountain of riches beneath the rustic arch of triumph. It is, above all, the last load, called "the cart of sheaves," which requires these precautions, for this is a rural festival, and the last sheaf lifted from the last furrow is placed on the top of the cart-load ornamented with ribbons and flowers, while the foreheads of the oxen and the whip of the driver are decorated also. The triumphant and toilsome entry of the cabbage into the house is a symbol of the prosperity and fruitfulness it represents.

Safe within the bridegroom's yard, the cabbage is taken from its stretcher and borne to the topmost peak of the house or barn. Whether it be a chimney, a gable, or a dove-cot that crowns the roof, the burden must, at any risk, be carried to the very highest point of the building. The "infidel" accompanies it as far as this, sets it down securely, and waters it with a great pitcher of wine, while a salvo of pistol-shots and demonstrations of joy from the "infidel's wife" proclaim its inauguration.

Without delay, the same ceremony is repeated all over again. Another cabbage is dug from the garden of the husband and is carried with the same formalities and laid upon the roof which his wife has deserted to follow him. These trophies remain in their places until the wind and the rain destroy the baskets and carry away the cabbage. Yet their lives are long enough to give some chance of fulfilment to the prophecies which the old men and women make with bows and courtesies.

"Beautiful cabbage," they say, "live and flourish that our young bride may have a fine baby before a year is over; for if you die too quickly it is a sign of barrenness, and you will stick up there like an ill omen."

The day is already far gone when all these things are accomplished. All that remains undone is to take home the godfathers and godmothers of the newly married couple. When the so-called parents dwell at a distance, they are accompanied by the music and the whole wedding procession as far as the limits of the parish; there they dance anew on the high road, and everybody kisses them good-bye. The "infidel" and his wife are then washed and dressed decently, if the fatigue of their parts has not already driven them away to take a nap.

Everybody was still dancing and singing and eating in the Town Hall of Belair at midnight on this third day of the wedding when Germain was married. The old men at table could not stir, and for good reason. They recovered neither their legs nor their wits until dawn on the morrow. While they were regaining their dwellings, silently and with uncertain steps, Germain, proud and active, went out to hitch his oxen, leaving his young wife to slumber until daylight. The lark, carolling as it mounted to the skies, seemed to him the voice of his heart returning thanks to Providence. The hoar-frost, sparkling on the leafless bushes, seemed to him the whiteness of April flowers that comes before the budding leaves. Everything in nature was laughing and happy for him. Little Pierre had laughed and jumped so much the evening before that he did not come to help lead his oxen; but Germain was glad to be alone. He fell on his knees in the furrow he was about to plough afresh, and said his morning prayer with such a burst of feeling that two tears rolled down his cheeks, still moist with sweat.

Afar off he heard the songs of the boys from neighbouring villages, who were starting on their return home, singing again in their hoarse voices the happy tunes of the night before.

FRANÇOIS THE WAIF

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

François Le Champi appeared for the first time in the *feuilleton* of the *Journal des Débats*. Just as the plot of my story was reaching its development, another more serious development was announced in the first column of the same newspaper. It was the final downfall of the July Monarchy, in the last days of February, 1848.

This catastrophe was naturally very prejudicial to my story, the publication of which was interrupted and delayed, and not finally completed, if I remember correctly, until the end of a month. For those of my readers who are artists either by profession or instinct, and are interested in the details of the construction of works of art, I shall add to my introduction that, some days before the conversation of which that introduction is the outcome, I took a walk through the *Chemin aux Napes*. The word *nape*, which, in the figurative language of that part of the country, designates the beautiful plant called *nénufar* or *nymphæa*, is happily descriptive of the broad leaves that lie upon the surface of the water, as a cloth (*nappe*) upon a table; but I prefer to write it with a single *p*, and to trace its derivation from *napée*, thus leaving unchanged its mythological origin.

The *Chemin aux Napes*, which probably none of you, my dear readers, will ever see, as it leads to nothing that can repay you for the trouble of passing through so much mire, is a break-neck path, skirting along a ditch where, in the muddy water, grow the most beautiful nymphææ in the world, more fragrant than lilies, whiter than camellias, purer than the vesture of virgins, in the midst of the lizards and other reptiles that crawl about the mud and flowers, while the kingfisher darts like living lightning along the banks, and skims with a fiery track the rank and luxuriant vegetation of the sewer.

A child six or seven years old, mounted bare-back upon a loose horse, made the animal leap the hedge behind me, and then, letting himself slide to the ground, left his shaggy colt in the pasture, and returned to try jumping over the barrier which he had so lightly crossed on horseback a minute before. It was not such an easy task for his little legs; I helped him, and had with him a conversation similar to that between the miller's wife and the foundling, related in the beginning of *The Waif.* When I questioned him about his age, which he did not know, he literally delivered himself of the brilliant reply that he was two years old. He knew neither his own name, nor that of his parents, nor of the place he lived in; all that he knew was to cling on an unbroken colt, as a bird clings to a branch shaken by the storm.

I have had educated several foundlings of both sexes, who have turned out well physically and morally. It is no less certain, however, that these forlorn children are apt, in rural districts, to become bandits, owing to their utter lack of education. Intrusted to the care of the poorest people, because of the insufficient pittance assigned to them, they often practise, for the benefit of their adopted parents, the shameful calling of beggars. Would it not be possible to increase this pittance on condition that the foundlings shall never beg, even at the doors of their neighbours and friends?

I have also learned by experience that nothing is more difficult than to teach self-respect and the love of work to children who have already begun understandingly to live upon alms.

GEORGE SAND.

NOHANT, *May* 20, 1852.

FRANÇOIS THE WAIF

INTRODUCTION

R—— and I were coming home from our walk by the light of the moon which faintly silvered the dusky country lanes. It was a mild autumn evening, and the sky was slightly overcast; we observed the resonance of the air peculiar to the season, and a certain mystery spread over the face of nature. At the approach of the long winter sleep, it seems as if every creature and thing stealthily agreed to enjoy what is left of life and animation before the deadly torpor of the frost; and as if the whole creation, in order to cheat the march of time, and to avoid being detected and interrupted in the last frolics of its festival, advanced without sound or apparent motion toward its orgies in the night. The birds give out stifled cries instead of their joyous summer warblings. The cricket of the fields sometimes chirps inadvertently; but it soon stops again, and carries elsewhere its song or its wail. The plants hastily breathe out their last perfume, which is all the sweeter for being more delicate and less profuse. The yellowing leaves now no longer rustle in the breeze, and the flocks and herds graze in silence without cries of love or combat.

My friend and I walked quietly along, and our involuntary thoughtfulness made us silent and attentive to the softened beauty of nature, and to the enchanting harmony of her last chords, which were dying away in an imperceptible *pianissimo*. Autumn is a sad and sweet *andante*, which makes an admirable preparation for the solemn *adagio* of winter.

"It is all so peaceful," said my friend at last, for, in spite of our silence, he had followed my thoughts as I followed his; "everything seems absorbed in a reverie so foreign and so indifferent to the labours, cares, and preoccupations of man, that I wonder what expression, what colour, and what form of art and poetry human intelligence could give at this moment to the face of nature. In order to explain better to you the end of my inquiry, I may compare the evening, the sky, and the landscape, dimmed, and yet harmonious and complete, to the soul of a wise and religious peasant, who labours and profits by his toil, who rejoices in the possession of the life to which he is born, without the need, the longing, or the means of revealing and expressing his inner life. I try to place myself in the heart of the mystery of this natural rustic life—I, who am civilised, who cannot enjoy by instinct alone, and who am always tormented by the desire of giving an account of my contemplation, or of my meditation, to myself and to others.

"Then, too," continued my friend, "I am trying to find out what relation can be established between my intelligence, which is too active, and that of the peasant, which is not active enough; just as I was considering a moment ago what painting, music, description, the interpretation of art, in short, could add to the beauty of this autumnal night which is revealed to me in its mysterious silence, and affects me in some magical and unknown way."

"Let us see," said I, "how your question is put. This October night, this colourless sky, this music without any distinct or connected melody, this calm of nature, and this peasant who by his very simplicity is more able than we to enjoy and understand it, though he cannot portray it—let us put all this together and call it *primitive life*, with relation to our own highly developed and complicated life, which I shall call *artificial life*. You are asking what possible connection or direct link can there be between these two opposite conditions in the existence of persons and things; between the palace and the cottage, between the artist and the universe, between the poet and the labourer."

"Yes," he answered, "and let us be exact: between the language spoken by nature, primitive life, and instinct, and that spoken by art, science—in a word, by *knowledge*."

"To answer in the language you have adopted, I should say that the link between *knowledge* and *sensation* is *feeling*."

"It is about the definition of feeling that I am going to question you and myself, for its mission is the interpretation which is troubling me. It is the art or artist, if you prefer, empowered to translate the purity, grace, and charm of the primitive life to those who only live the artificial life, and who are, if you will allow me to say so, the greatest fools in the world in the presence of nature and her divine secrets."

"You are asking nothing less than the secret of art, and you must look for it in the breast of God. No artist can reveal it, for he does not know it himself, and cannot give an account of the sources of his own inspiration or his own weakness. How shall one attempt to express beauty, simplicity, and truth? Do I know? And can anybody teach us? No, not even the greatest artists, because if they tried to do so they would cease to be artists, and would become critics; and criticism——"

"And criticism," rejoined my friend, "has been revolving for centuries about the mystery without understanding it. But, excuse me, that is not exactly what I meant. I am still more radical at this moment, and call the power of art in question. I despise it, I annihilate it, I declare that art is not born, that it does not exist; or, if it has been, it's time is past. It is exhausted, it has no more expression, no more breath of life, no more means to sing of the beauty of truth. Nature is a work of art, but God is the only artist that exists, and man is but an arranger in bad taste. Nature is beautiful, and breathes feeling from all her pores; love, youth, beauty are in her imperishable. But man has but foolish means and miserable faculties for feeling and expressing them. He had better keep aloof, silent and absorbed in contemplation. Come, what have you to say?

"I agree, and am quite satisfied with your opinion," I answered.

"Ah!" he cried, "you are going too far, and embrace my paradox too warmly. I am only pleading, and want you to reply."

"I reply, then, that a sonnet of Petrarch has its relative beauty, which is equivalent to the beauty of the water of Vaucluse; that a fine landscape of Ruysdael has a charm which equals that of this evening; that Mozart sings in the language of men as well as Philomel in that of birds; that Shakespeare delineates passions, emotions, and instincts as vividly as the actual primitive man can experience them. This is art and its relativeness—in short, feeling."

"Yes, it is all a work of transformation! But suppose that it does not satisfy me? Even if you were a thousand times in the right according to the decrees of taste and esthetics, what if I think Petrarch's verses less harmonious than the roar of the waterfall, and so on? If I maintain that there is in this evening a charm that no one could reveal to me unless I had felt it myself; and that all Shakespeare's passion is cold in comparison with that I see gleaming in the eyes of a jealous peasant who beats his wife, what should you have to say? You must convince my feeling. And if it eludes your examples and resists your proofs? Art is not an invincible demonstrator, and feeling not always satisfied by the best definition."

"I have really nothing to answer except that art is a demonstration of which nature is the proof; that the pre-existing fact of the proof is always present to justify or contradict the demonstration, which nobody can make successfully unless he examine the proof with religious love."

"So the demonstration could not do without the proof; but could the proof do without the demonstration?"

"No doubt God could do without it; but, although you are talking as if you did not belong to us, I am willing to wager that you would understand nothing of the proof if you had not found the demonstration under a thousand forms in the tradition of art, and if you were not yourself a demonstration constantly acting upon the proof."

"That is just what I am complaining of. I should like to rid myself of this eternal irritating demonstration; to erase from my memory the teachings and the forms of art; never to think of painting when I look at a landscape, of music when I listen to the wind, or of poetry when I admire and take delight in both together. I should like to enjoy everything instinctively, because I think that the cricket which is singing just now is more joyous and ecstatic than I."

"You complain, then, of being a man?"

"No; I complain of being no longer a primitive man."

"It remains to be known whether he was capable of enjoying what he could not understand."

"I do not suppose that he was similar to the brutes, for as soon as he became a man he thought and felt differently from them. But I cannot form an exact idea of his emotions, and that is what bothers me. I should like to be what the existing state of society allows a great number of men to be from the cradle to the grave—I should like to be a peasant; a peasant who does not know how to read, whom God has endowed with good instincts, a serene organisation, and an upright conscience; and I fancy that in the sluggishness of my useless faculties, and in the ignorance of depraved tastes, I should be as happy as the primitive man of Jean-Jacques's dreams."

"I, too, have had this same dream; who has not? But, even so, your reasoning is not conclusive, for the most simple and ingenuous peasant may still be an artist; and I believe even that his art is superior to ours. The form is different, but it appeals more strongly to me than all the forms which belong to civilisation. Songs, ballads, and rustic tales say in a few words what our literature can only amplify and disguise."

"I may triumph, then?" resumed my friend. "The peasant's art is the best, because it is more directly inspired by nature by being in closer contact with her. I confess I went to extremes in saying that art was good for nothing; but I meant that I should like to feel after the fashion of the peasant, and I do not contradict myself now. There are certain Breton laments, made by beggars, which in three couplets are worth all Goethe and Byron put together, and which prove that appreciation of truth and beauty was more spontaneous and complete in such simple souls than in our most distinguished poets. And music, too! Is not our country full of lovely melodies? And though they do not possess painting as an art, they have it in their speech, which is a hundred times more expressive, forcible, and logical than our literary language."

"I agree with you," said I, "especially as to this last point. It drives me to despair that I am obliged to write in the language of the Academy, when I am much more familiar with another tongue infinitely more fitted for expressing a whole order of emotions, thoughts, and feelings."

"Oh, yes!" said he, "that fresh and unknown world is closed to modern art, and no study can help you to express it even to yourself, with all your sympathies for the peasant, if you try to introduce it into the domain of civilised art and the intellectual intercourse of artificial life."

"Alas!" I answered, "this thought has often disturbed me. I have myself seen and felt, in common with all civilised beings, that primitive life was the dream and ideal of all men and all times. From the shepherds of Longus down to those of Trianon, pastoral life has been a perfumed Eden, where souls wearied and harassed by the tumult of the world have sought a refuge. Art, which has always flattered and fawned upon the too fortunate among mankind, has passed through an unbroken series of *pastorals*.

And under the title of 'The History of Pastorals' I have often wished to write a learned and critical work, in which to review all the different rural dreams to which the upper classes have so fondly clung.

"I should follow their modifications, which are always in inverse relation to the depravity of morals, for they become innocent and sentimental in proportion as society is shameless and corrupt. I should like to *order* this book of a writer better qualified than I to accomplish it, and then I should read it with delight. It should be a complete treatise on art; for music, painting, architecture, literature in all its forms, the theatre, poetry, romances, eclogues, songs, fashions, gardens, and even dress, have been influenced by the infatuation for the pastoral dream. All the types of the golden age, the shepherdesses of Astræa, who are first nymphs and then marchionesses, and who pass through the Lignon of Florian, wear satin and powder under Louis XV., and are put into sabots by Sedaine at the end of the monarchy, are all more or less false, and seem to us to-day contemptible and ridiculous. We have done with them, and see only their ghosts at the opera; and yet they once reigned at court and were the delight of kings, who borrowed from them the shepherd's crook and scrip.

"I have often wondered why there are no more shepherds, for we are not so much in love with the truth lately that art and literature can afford to despise the old conventional types rather than those introduced by the present mode. To-day we are devoted to force and brutality, and on the background of these passions we embroider decorations horrible enough to make our hair stand on end if we could take them seriously."

"If we have no more shepherds," rejoined my friend, "and if literature has changed one false ideal for another, is it not an involuntary attempt of art to bring itself down to the level of the intelligence of all classes? Does not the dream of equality afloat in society impel art to a fierce brutality in order to awaken those instincts and passions common to all men, of whatever rank they may be? Nobody has as yet reached the truth. It exists no more in a hideous realism than in an embellished idealism; but there is plainly a search for it, and if the search is in the wrong direction, the eagerness of the pursuit is only quickened. Let us see: the drama, poetry, and the novel have thrown away the shepherd's crook for the dagger, and when rustic life appears on the scene it has a stamp of reality which was wanting in the old pastorals. But there is no more poetry in it, I am sorry to say; and I do not yet see the means of reinstating the pastoral ideal without making it either too gaudy or too sombre. You have often thought of doing it, I know; but can you hope for success?"

"No," I answered, "for there is no form for me to adopt, and there is no language in which to express my conception of rustic simplicity. If I made the labourer of the fields speak as he does speak, it would be necessary to have a translation on the opposite page for the civilised reader; and if I made him speak as we do, I should create an impossible being, in whom it would be necessary to suppose an order of ideas which he does not possess."

"Even if you made him speak as he does speak, your own language would constantly make a disagreeable contrast; and in my opinion you cannot escape this criticism. You describe a peasant girl, call her *Jeanne,* and put into her mouth words which she might possibly use. But you, who are the writer of the novel, and are anxious to make your readers understand your fondness for painting this kind of type—you compare her to a druidess, to a Jeanne d'Arc, and so on. Your opinions and language make an incongruous effect with hers, like the clashing of harsh colours in a picture; and this is not the way fully to enter into nature, even if you idealise her. Since then you have made a better and more truthful study in *The Devil's Pool.* Still, I am not yet satisfied; the tip of the author's finger is apparent from time to time; and there are some author's words, as they are called by Henri Mounier, an artist who has succeeded in being true in *caricature*, and who has consequently solved the problem he had set for himself. I know that your own problem is no easier to solve. But you must still try, although you are sure of not succeeding; masterpieces are only lucky attempts. You may console yourself for not achieving masterpieces, provided that your attempts are conscientious."

"I am consoled beforehand," I answered, "and I am willing to begin again whenever you wish; please give me your advice."

"For example," said he, "we were present last evening at a rustic gathering at the farm, and the hemp-dresser told a story until two o'clock in the morning. The priest's servant helped him with his tale, and resumed it when he stopped; she was a peasant-woman of some slight education; he was uneducated, but happily gifted by nature and endowed with a certain rude eloquence. Between them they related a true story, which was rather long, and like a simple kind of novel. Can you remember it?"

"Perfectly, and I could repeat it word for word in their language."

"But their language would require a translation; you must write in your own, without using a single word unintelligible enough to necessitate a footnote for the reader."

"I see that you are setting an impossible task for me—a task into which I have never plunged without emerging dissatisfied with myself, and overcome with a sense of my own weakness."

"No matter, you must plunge in again, for I understand you artists; you need obstacles to rouse your enthusiasm, and you never do well what is plain and easy to you. Come, begin, tell me the story of the 'Waif,' but not in the way that you and I heard it last night. That was a masterly piece of narrative for you and me who are children of the soil.

But tell it to me as if you had on your right hand a Parisian speaking the modern tongue, and on your left a peasant before whom you were unwilling to utter a word or phrase which he could not understand. You must speak clearly for the Parisian, and simply for the peasant. One will accuse you of a lack of local colour, and the other of a lack of elegance. But I shall be listening too, and I am trying to discover by what means art, without ceasing to be universal, can penetrate the mystery of primitive simplicity, and interpret the charm of nature to the mind."

"This, then, is a study which we are going to undertake together?"

"Yes, for I shall interrupt you when you stumble."

"Very well, let us sit down on this bank covered with wild thyme. I will begin; but first allow me to clear my voice with a few scales."

"What do you mean? I did not know that you could sing."

"I am only speaking metaphorically. Before beginning a work of art, I think it is well to call to mind some theme or other to serve as a type, and to induce the desired frame of mind. So, in order to prepare myself for what you ask, I must recite the story of the dog of Brisquet, which is short, and which I know by heart."

"What is it? I cannot recall it."

"It is an exercise for my voice, written by Charles Nodier, who tried his in all possible keys; a great artist, to my thinking, and one who has never received all the applause he deserved, because, among all his varied attempts, he failed more often than he succeeded. But when a man has achieved two or three masterpieces, no matter how short they may be, he should be crowned, and his mistakes should be forgotten. Here is the dog of Brisquet. You must listen."

Then I repeated to my friend the story of the "Bichonne," which moved him to tears, and which he declared to be a masterpiece of style.

"I should be discouraged in what I am going to attempt," said I, "for this Odyssey of the poor dog of Brisquet, which did not take five minutes to recite, has no stain or blot; it is a diamond cut by the first lapidary in the world—for Nodier is essentially a lapidary in literature. I am not scientific, and must call sentiment to my aid. Then, too, I cannot promise to be brief, for I know beforehand that my study will fail in the first of all requisites, that of being short and good at the same time."

"Go on, nevertheless," said my friend, bored by my preliminaries.

"This, then, is the history of 'François the *Champi*,'" I resumed, "and I shall try to remember the first part without any alteration. It was Monique, the old servant of the priest, who began."

"One moment," said my severe auditor, "I must object to your title. *Champi* is not French."

"I beg your pardon," I answered. "The dictionary says it is obsolete, but Montaigne uses it, and I do not wish to be more French than the great writers who have created the language. So I shall not call my story 'François the Foundling,' nor 'François the Bastard,' but 'François the *Champi*'—that is to say, the Waif, the forsaken child of the fields, as he was once called in the great world, and is still called in our part of the country."

CHAPTER I

ONE morning, when Madeleine Blanchet, the young wife of the miller of Cormouer, went down to the end of her meadow to wash her linen in the fountain, she found a little child sitting in front of her washing-board playing with the straw she used as a cushion for her knees. Madeleine Blanchet looked at the child, and was surprised not to recognise him, for the road which runs near by is unfrequented, and few strangers are to be met with in the neighbourhood.

"Who are you, my boy?" said she to the little boy, who turned confidingly toward her, but did not seem to understand her question. "What is your name?" Madeleine Blanchet went on, as she made him sit down beside her, and knelt down to begin to wash.

"François," answered the child.

"François who?"

"Who?" said the child stupidly.

"Whose son are you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know your father's name?"

"I have no father."

"Is he dead then?"

"I don't know."

"And your mother?"

"She is over there," said the child, pointing to a poor little hovel which stood at the distance of two gunshots from the mill, and the thatched roof of which could be seen through the willows.

"Oh! I know," said Madeleine. "Is she the woman who has come to live here, and who moved in last evening?"

"Yes," answered the child.

"And you used to live at Mers?"

"I don't know."

"You are not a wise child. Do you know your mother's name, at least?"

"Yes, it is Zabelle."

"Isabelle who? Don't you know her other name?"

"No, of course not."

"What you know will not wear your brains out," said Madeleine, smiling and beginning to beat her linen.

"What do you say?" asked little François.

Madeleine looked at him again; he was a fine child, and had magnificent eyes. "It is a pity," she thought, "that he seems to be so idiotic. How old are you?" she continued. "Perhaps you do not know that either."

The truth is that he knew no more about this than about the rest. He tried his best to answer, ashamed to have the miller's wife think him so foolish, and delivered himself of this brilliant reply:

"Two years old."

"Indeed?" said Madeleine, wringing out her linen, without looking at him any more, "you are a real little simpleton, and nobody has taken the trouble to teach you, my poor child. You are tall enough to be six years old, but you have not the sense of a child of two."

"Perhaps," answered François. Then, making another effort, as if to shake off the lethargy from his poor little mind, he said:

"Were you asking for my name? It is François the Waif."

"Oh! I understand now," said Madeleine, looking at him compassionately; and she was no longer astonished that he was so dirty, ragged, and stupid.

"You have not clothes enough," said she, "and the weather is chill; I am sure that you must be cold."

"I do not know," answered the poor waif, who was so accustomed to suffering that he was no longer conscious of it.

Madeleine sighed. She thought of her little Jeannie, who was only a year old, and was sleeping comfortably in his cradle watched over by his grandmother, while this poor little waif was shivering all alone at the fountain's brink, preserved from drowning only by the mercy of Providence, for he was too foolish to know that he would die if he fell into the water.

Madeleine, whose heart was full of kindness, felt the child's arm and found it warm, although he shook from time to time, and his pretty face was very pale.

" Have you any fever? " she asked.

" I don't know," answered the child, who was always feverish.

Madeleine Blanchet loosened the woollen shawl from her shoulders and wrapped it round the waif, who let her have her way without showing either surprise or pleasure. She picked up all the straw from under her knees and made a bed for him, on which he soon fell asleep; then she made haste to finish washing her little Jeannie's clothes, for she nursed her baby and was anxious to return to him.

When her task was completed, the wet linen was twice as heavy as before, and she could not carry it all. She took home what she could, and left the rest with her wooden beater beside the water, intending to come back immediately and wake up the waif. Madeleine Blanchet was neither tall nor strong. She was a very pretty woman, with a fearless spirit and a reputation for sense and sweetness.

As she opened the door of her house she heard the clattering of sabots running after her over the little bridge above the mill-dam, and, turning round, she saw the waif, who had caught up with her, and was bringing her her beater, her soap, the rest of the linen, and her shawl.

" Oh! " said she, laying her hand on his shoulder, " you are not so foolish as I thought, for you are obliging, and nobody who has a good heart can be stupid. Come in, my child, come in and rest. Look at this poor little boy! He is carrying a load heavier than himself! Here," said she to the miller's old mother, who handed her her baby, rosy and smiling, " here is a poor sick-looking waif. You understand fevers, and we must try to cure him.'

"Ah! that is the fever of poverty!" replied the old woman, as she looked at François. " He could cure it with good soup, but he cannot get that. He is the little waif that belongs to the woman who moved in yesterday. She is your husband's tenant, Madeleine. She looks very wretched, and I am afraid that she will not pay regularly.".

Madeleine did not answer. She knew that her husband and her mother-in-law were not charitable, and that they loved their money more than their neighbour. She nursed her baby, and when the old woman had gone out to drive home the geese, she took François by the hand, and, holding Jeannie on her arm, went with them to Zabelle's.

Zabelle, whose real name was Isabelle Bigot, was an old maid of fifty, as disinterested as a woman can be when she has nothing to live on, and is in constant dread of starvation. She had taken François after he was weaned, from a dying woman, and had brought him up ever since, for the sake of the monthly payment of a few pieces of silver, and with the expectation of making a little servant out of him. She had lost her sheep, and was forced to buy others on credit, whenever she could obtain it; for she had no other means of support than her little flock, and a dozen hens, which lived at the expense of the parish. She meant François to tend this poor flock along the roadsides, until he should be old enough to make his first communion, after which she expected to hire him out as best she could, either as a little swineherd or a ploughboy, and she was sure that if his heart were good he would give part of his wages to his adopted mother.

Zabelle had come from Mers, the day after the feast of Saint Martin, leaving her last goat behind her in payment of what she owed on her rent, and had taken possession of the little cottage belonging to the mill of Cormouer, without being able to offer any security beside her pallet-bed, two chairs, a chest, and a few earthen vessels. The house was so poor, so ill-protected from the weather, and of such trifling value, that the miller was obliged to incur the risk of letting it to a poor tenant, or to leave it unoccupied.

Madeleine talked with Zabelle, and soon perceived that she was not a bad woman, and that she would do all in her power to pay the rent. She had some affection for the waif, but she was so accustomed to see him suffer and to suffer herself that she was at first more surprised than pleased by the pity which the rich miller's wife showed for the forlorn child.

At last, after she had recovered from her astonishment, and understood that Madeleine had not come to ask anything of her, but to do her a kindness, she took courage, related her story, which was like that of all the unfortunate, and thanked her warmly for her interest. Madeleine assured her that she would do her best to help her, but begged her to tell nobody, acknowledging that she was not her own mistress at home, and could only afford her assistance in secret.

She left her woollen shawl with Zabelle, and exacted a promise from her that she would cut it into a coat for the waif that same evening, and not allow the pieces to be seen before they were sewed together. She saw, indeed, that Zabelle consented reluctantly, thinking the shawl very convenient for her own use, and so she was obliged to tell her that she would do no more for her unless the waif were warmly clothed in three days' time.

"Do you not suppose," she added, "that my mother-in-law, who is so wide-awake, would recognise my shawl on your shoulders? Do you wish to get me into trouble? You may count upon my helping you in other ways if you keep your own counsel. Now, listen to me: your waif has the fever, and he will die if you do not take good care of him."

"Do you think so?" said Zabelle. "I should be very sorry to lose him, because he has the best heart in the world; he never complains, and is as obedient as if he belonged to a respectable family. He is quite different from other waifs, who are ill-tempered and unruly, and always in mischief."

"That is only because they are rebuffed and ill-treated. If yours is good, it is because you have been kind to him, you may be sure."

"That is true," rejoined Zabelle; "children are more grateful than people think, and though this little fellow is not bright, he can be very useful at times. Once, when I was ill last year, and he was only five years old, he took as good care of me as if he were a grown-up person.'

"Listen," said the miller's wife: "you must send him to me every morning and evening, at the hour when I give soup to my child. I shall make more than is necessary, and the waif may eat what is left; nobody will pay any attention."

"Oh! I shall not dare bring him to you, and he will never have enough sense to know the right time himself."

"Let us arrange it in this way. When the soup is ready, I will put my distaff on the bridge over the dam. Look, you can see it very well from here. Then you must send the child over with a sabot in his hand, as if he were coming to get a light for the fire; and if he eats my soup, you will have all yours to yourself. You will both be better fed."

"That will do very well," answered Zabelle. "I see that you are a clever woman, and that I am fortunate in coming here. I was very much afraid of your husband, who has the reputation of being a hard man, and if I could have gone elsewhere I should not have taken his house, especially as it is in wretched repair, and the rent is high. But I see that you are kind to the poor, and will help me to bring up my waif. Ah! if the soup could only cure his fever! It would be a great misfortune to me to lose that child! He brings me but little profit, for all that I receive from the asylum goes for his support. But I love him as if he were my own child, because I know that he is good, and will be of use to me later. Have you noticed how well-grown he is for his age, and will soon be able to work?"

Thus François the Waif was reared by the care and kindness of Madeleine, the miller's wife. He soon recovered his health, for he was strongly built, and any rich man in the country might have wished for a son with as handsome a face and as well-knit a frame. He was as brave as a man, and swam in the river like a fish, diving even under the mill-dam; he feared neither fire nor water; he jumped on the wildest colts and rode them without a halter into the pasture, kicking them with his heels to keep them in the right path, and holding on to their manes when they leaped the ditches. It was singular that he did all this in his quiet, easy way, without saying anything, or changing his childlike and somewhat sleepy expression.

It was on account of this expression that he passed for a fool; but it is none the less true that if it were a question of robbing a magpie's nest at the top of a lofty poplar, or of finding a cow that had strayed far from home, or of killing a thrush with a stone, no child was bolder, more adroit, or more certain of success than he. The other children called it *luck*, which is supposed to be the portion of a waif in this hard world. So they always let him take the first part in dangerous amusements.

"He will never get hurt," they said, "because he is a waif. A kernel of wheat fears the havoc of the storm, but a random seed never dies."

For two years all went well. Zabelle found means to buy a few sheep and goats, though no one knew how. She rendered a good many small services to the mill, and Cadet Blanchet, the miller, was induced to make some repairs in her roof, which leaked in every direction. She was enabled to dress herself and her waif a little better, and looked gradually less poverty-stricken than on her arrival. Madeleine's mother-in-law made some harsh comments on the disappearance of certain articles, and on the quantity of bread consumed in the house, and once Madeleine was obliged to plead guilty in order to shield Zabelle from suspicion; but, contrary to his mother's expectation, Cadet Blanchet was hardly angry at all, and seemed to wink at what his wife had done.

The secret of Cadet Blanchet's compliance was that he was still very much in love with his wife. Madeleine was pretty, and not the least of a coquette; he heard her praises sung everywhere. Besides, his affairs were prosperous, and, as he was one of those men who are cruel only when they are in dread of calamity, he was kinder to Madeleine than anybody could have supposed possible. This roused Mother Blanchet's jealousy, and she revenged herself by petty annoyances, which Madeleine bore in silence, and without complaining to her husband.

It was the best way of putting an end to them, and no woman could be more patient and reasonable in this respect than Madeleine. But they say in our country that goodness avails less in the end than malice, and the day came when Madeleine was rebuked and called to account for her charities.

It was a year when the grain had been wasted by hail, and an overflow of the river had spoiled the hay. Cadet Blanchet was not in a good humour, and one day, as he was coming back from market with a comrade who had just married a very beautiful girl, the latter said to him:

"You, too, were not to be pitied *in your day*, for your Madelon used to be a very attractive girl."

"What do you mean by *my day*, and *Madelon used to be?* Do you think that she and I are old? Madeleine is not twenty yet, and I am not aware that she has lost her looks."

"Oh, no, I do not say so," replied the other. "Madeleine is certainly still good-looking; but you know that when a woman marries so young you cannot expect her to be pretty long. After she has nursed one child, she is already worn; and your wife was never strong, for you see that she is very thin, and has lost the appearance of health. Is the poor thing ill?"

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask me?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think she looks sad, as if she suffered or had some sorrow. A woman's bloom lasts no longer than the blossom of the vine. I must expect to see my wife with a long face and sober expression. And we men are only in love with our wives while we are jealous of them. They exasperate us; we scold them and beat them sometimes; they are distressed and weep; they stay at home and are afraid of us; then they are bored and care no more about us. But we are happy, for we are the masters. And yet, one fine morning, lo and behold, a man sees that if nobody wants his wife, it is because she has grown ugly; so he loves her no longer, and goes to court his neighbour's. It is his fate. Good evening, Cadet Blanchet; you kissed my wife rather too warmly to-night; I took note of it, though I said nothing. I tell you this to let you know that she and I shall not quarrel over it, and that I shall try not to make her as melancholy as yours, because I know my own character. If I am ever jealous, I shall be cruel, and when I have no more occasion for jealousy, I shall be still worse perhaps."

A good disposition profits by a good lesson; but, though active and intelligent, Cadet Blanchet was too arrogant to keep his self-possession. He came home with his head high and his eye bloodshot. He looked at Madeleine as he had not done for a long time, and perceived that she was pale and altered. He asked her if she were ill, so rudely that she turned still paler, and answered in a faint voice that she was quite well. He took offence, Heaven knows why, and sat down to the table, desirous of seeking a quarrel. He

MARIN COUNTY FREE LIBRARY

had not long to wait for an opportunity. They talked of the dearness of wheat, and Mother Blanchet remarked, as she did every evening, that too much bread was eaten in the house. Madeleine was silent. Cadet Blanchet wanted to make her responsible for the waste, and the old woman declared that she had caught the waif carrying away half a loaf that very morning. Madeleine should have been indignant and held her own, but she could only cry. Blanchet thought of what his companion had said to him, and was still more irritated; and so it happened that from that day on, explain it as you can, he no longer loved his wife, but made her wretched.

CHAPTER II

He made her wretched, and as he had never made her happy she was doubly unlucky in her marriage. She had allowed herself to be married, at sixteen, to this rough, red-faced man, who drank deeply on Sunday, was in a fury all Monday, in bad spirits on Tuesday, and worked like a horse all the rest of the week to make up for lost time, for he was avaricious, and had no leisure to think of his wife. He was less ill-tempered on Saturday, because he had finished his work, and expected to amuse himself next day. But a single day of good humour in a week is not enough, and Madeleine had no pleasure in seeing him merry, because she knew that he would be sure to come home the next evening in a passion.

But as she was young and pretty, and so gentle that it was impossible to be angry long with her, there were still intervals when he was kind and just, and when he took her hands in his and said:

"Madeleine, you are a good wife, and I think that you were made expressly for me. If I had married a coquette, such as so many women are, I should kill her, or I should drown myself under my own millwheel. But I know that you are well-behaved and industrious, and that you are worth your weight in gold."

After four years of married life, however, his love had quite gone; he had no more kind words for her, and was enraged that she made no answer to his abuse. What answer could she make? She knew that her husband was unjust, and was unwilling to reproach him for it, for she considered it her duty to respect the master whom she had never been able to love.

Mother Blanchet was pleased to see her son master of the house again, as she said; just as if it had ever been otherwise. She hated her daughter-in-law, because she knew her to be better than herself. When she could find no other cause of complaint, she reviled her for not being strong, for coughing all winter, and for having only one child. She despised her for this, for knowing how to read and write, and for reading prayers in a corner of the orchard, instead of gossiping and chattering with the dames of the vicinity.

Madeleine placed her soul in God's hands, and thinking lamentations useless, she bore her affliction as if it were her due. She withdrew her heart from this earth, and often dreamed of paradise, as if she wished to die. Still, she was careful of her health, and armed herself with courage, because she knew that her child could only be happy through her, and she accepted everything for the sake of the love she bore him.

Though she could not feel any great affection for Zabelle, she was still fond of her, because this woman, who was half good and half selfish, continued to do her best for the poor waif; and Madeleine, who saw how people deteriorate who think of themselves alone, was inclined to esteem only those who thought sometimes of others. As she was the only person in the neighbourhood who took no care of herself, she was entirely isolated and very sorrowful, without fully understanding the cause of her grief.

Little by little, however, she observed that the waif, who was then ten years old, began to think as she did. When I say *think*, I mean you to understand that she judged from his behaviour; for there was no more sense in the poor child's words than on the first day she had spoken with him. He could not express himself, and when people tried to make him talk they were sure to interrupt him immediately, for he knew nothing about anything. But if he were needed to run an errand, he was always ready, and when it was an errand for Madeleine, he ran before she could ask him. He looked as if he had not understood the commission, but he executed it so swiftly and well that even she was amazed.

One day, as he was carrying little Jeannie in his arms, and allowing him to pull his hair for his amusement, Madeleine caught the child from him with some slight irritation, saying half involuntarily:

" François, if you begin now by suffering all the whims of other people, there is no knowing where they will stop."

To her great surprise, François answered:

" I should rather suffer evil than return it."

Madeleine was astonished, and gazed into the eyes of the waif, where she saw something she had never observed in the eyes even of the most honest persons she knew; something so kind, and yet so decided, that she was quite bewildered. She sat down on the grass with her child on her knees, and made the waif sit on the edge of her dress, without daring to speak to him. She could scarcely understand why she was overcome with fear and shame that she had often jested with this child for being so foolish. It is true that she had always done so with extreme gentleness, and perhaps she had pitied and loved him the more for his stupidity; but now she fancied that he had always understood her ridicule, and had been pained by it without being able to say anything in return.

She soon forgot this incident, for a short time afterward her husband, who had become infatuated with a disreputable woman in the neighbourhood, undertook to hate his wife in good earnest, and to forbid her to allow Zabelle and her boy to enter the mill. Madeleine fell to thinking of still more secret means of aiding them, and warned Zabelle, telling her that she should pretend to neglect her for a time.

Zabelle was very much in awe of the miller, and had not Madeleine's power of endurance for the love of others. She argued to herself that the miller was the master, and could turn her out of doors, or increase her rent, and that Madeleine would be unable to prevent it. She reflected also that if she submitted to Mother Blanchet, she would establish herself in the good graces of the old woman, whose protection would be more useful to her than that of the young wife. So she went to the miller's mother, and confessed that she had received help from her daughter-in-law, declaring that she had done so against her will, and only out of pity for the waif, whom she had no means of feeding. The old woman detested the waif, though for no reason except that Madeleine took an interest in him. She advised Zabelle to rid herself of him, and promised her at this price to obtain six months' credit on her rent. The morrow of Saint Martin's day had come round, and as the year had been a hard one, Zabelle was out of money, and Madeleine was so closely watched that for some time she had been unable to give her any. Zabelle boldly promised to take back the waif to the foundling asylum the next day.

She had no sooner given her word than she repented of it, and at the sight of little François sleeping on his wretched pallet, her heart was as heavy as if she were about to commit a mortal sin. She could not sleep, and before dawn Mother Blanchet entered the hovel.

"Come, get up, Zabeau," she said. "You gave me your promise and you must keep it. If you wait to speak to my daughter-in-law, you will never do anything, but you must let the boy go, in her interest as well as your own, you see. My son has taken a dislike to him on account of his stupidity and greediness; my daughter-in-law has pampered him too much, and I am sure that he is a thief already. All foundlings are thieves from their birth, and it is mere folly to expect anything of such brats. This one will be the cause of your being driven away from here, and will ruin your reputation; he will furnish my son with a reason for beating his wife every day, and in the end, when he is tall and strong, he will become a highwayman, and will bring you to shame. Come, come, you must start! Take him through the fields as far as Corley, and there the stage-coach passes at eight o'clock. Get in with him, and you will reach Châteauroux, at noon, at the latest. You can come back this evening; there is a piece of money for your journey, and you will have enough left over to amuse yourself with in town."

Zabelle woke the child, dressed him in his best, made a bundle of the rest of his clothes, and, taking his hand, started off with him by the light of the moon.

As she walked along and the day broke, her heart failed her; she could neither hasten her steps, nor speak, and when she came to the high road, she sat down on the side of a ditch, more dead than alive. The stage-coach was approaching, and they had arrived only just in time.

The waif was not in the habit of worrying, and thus far he had followed his mother without suspicion; but when he saw a huge carriage bowling toward him for the first time in his life, the noise it made frightened him, and he tried to pull Zabelle back into the meadow which they had just left to join the high road. Zabelle thought that he understood his fate, and said:

"Come, poor François, you really must!"

François was still more frightened. He thought that the stage-coach was an enormous animal running after him to devour him. He who was so bold in meeting all the dangers which he knew lost his head, and rushed back screaming into the meadow. Zabelle ran after him; but when she saw him pale as death, her courage deserted her. She followed him all across the meadow, and allowed the stage-coach to go by.

CHAPTER III

They returned by the same road they had come, until they had gone half the distance, and then they stopped to rest. Zabelle was alarmed to see that the child trembled from head to foot, and his heart beat so violently as to agitate his poor old shirt. She made him sit down, and attempted to comfort him, but she did not know what she was saying, and François was not in a state to guess her meaning. She drew out a bit of bread from her basket and tried to persuade him to eat it; but he had no desire for food, and they sat on for a long time in silence.

At last, Zabelle, who was in the habit of recurring to her first thoughts, was ashamed of her weakness, and said to herself that she would be lost if she appeared again at the mill with the child. Another stage was to pass toward noon, and she decided to stay where they were until the moment necessary for returning to the high road; but as François was so terrified that he had lost the little sense he possessed, and as for the first time in his life he was capable of resisting her will, she tried to tempt him with the attractions of the horses' bells, the noise of the wheels, and the speed of the great vehicle.

In her efforts to inspire him with confidence, she said more than she intended; perhaps her repentance urged her to speak, in spite of herself, or it may be that when François woke that morning he had heard certain words of Mother Blanchet, which now returned to his mind; or else his poor wits cleared suddenly at the approach of calamity; at all events, he began to say, with the same expression in his eyes which had once astonished and almost startled Madeleine:

"Mother, you want to send me away from you! You want to take me far off from here and leave me."

Then he remembered the word asylum, spoken several times in his hearing. He had no idea what an asylum was, but it seemed to him more horrible than the stage-coach, and he cried with a shudder:

"You want to put me in the asylum!"

Zabelle had gone too far to retreat. She believed that the child knew more of her intentions than he really did, and without reflecting how easy it would be to deceive him and rid herself of him by stratagem, she undertook to explain the truth to him, and to make him understand that he would be much happier at the asylum than with her, that he would be better cared for there, would learn to work, and would be placed for a time in the charge of some woman less poor than herself, who would be a mother to him.

This attempted consolation put the finishing touch to the waif's despair. A strange and unknown future inspired him with more terror than all Zabelle could say of the hardships of a life with her. Besides, he loved with all his might this ungrateful mother, who cared less for him than for herself. He loved another, too, almost as much as Zabelle, and she was Madeleine; only he did not know that he loved her, and did not speak of her. He threw himself sobbing on the ground, tore up the grass with his hands and flung it over his face, as if he had fallen in mortal agony. When Zabelle, in her distress and impatience, tried to make him get up by force and threats, he beat his head so hard against the stones that he was covered with blood, and she thought he was about to kill himself.

It pleased God that Madeleine Blanchet should pass by at that moment. She had heard nothing of the departure of Zabelle and the child, and was coming home from Presles, where she had carried back some wool to a lady, who had given it to her to spin very fine, as she was considered the best spinster far and wide. She had received her payment, and was returning to the mill with ten crowns in her pocket. She was going to cross the river on one of those little plank bridges on a level with the surface of the water, which are often to be met with in that part of the country, when she heard heart-piercing shrieks, and recognised at once the voice of the poor waif. She flew in the direction of the cries, and saw the child, bathed in blood, struggling in Zabelle's arms. She could not understand it at first; for it looked as if Zabelle had cruelly struck him, and were trying to shake him off. This seemed the more probable, as François, on catching sight of her, rushed toward her, twined his arms about her like a little snake, and clung to her skirts, screaming:

"Madame Blanchet, Madame Blanchet, save me!"

Zabelle was tall and strong, and Madeleine was small and slight as a reed. Still, she was not afraid, and, imagining that Zabelle had gone crazy, and was going to murder the child, she placed herself in front of him, resolved to protect him or to die while he was making his escape.

A few words, however, sufficed for an explanation. Zabelle, who was more grieved than angry, told the story, and François, who at last took in all the sadness of his lot, managed this time to profit by what he heard, with more cleverness than he had ever been supposed to possess. After Zabelle had finished, he kept fast hold of the miller's wife, saying:

"Don't send me away, don't let me be sent away."

And he went to and fro between Zabelle, who was crying, and the miller's wife, who was crying still harder, repeating all kinds of words and prayers, which scarcely seemed to come from his lips, for this was the first time he had ever been able to express himself.

"O my mother, my darling mother!" said he to Zabelle, "why do you want me to leave you? Do you want me to die of grief and never see you again? What have I done, that you no longer love me? Have I not always obeyed you? Have I done any harm? I have always taken good care of our animals—you told me so yourself; and when you kissed me every evening, you said I was your child, and you never said that you were not my mother! Keep me, mother, keep me; I am praying to you as I pray to God! I shall always take care of you; I shall always work for you; if you are not satisfied with me, you may beat me, and I shall not mind; but do not send me away until I have done something wrong."

Then he went to Madeleine, and said:

"Madame Blanchet, take pity on me. Tell my mother to keep me. I shall never go to your house, since it is forbidden, and if you want to give me anything, I shall know that I must not take it. I shall speak to Master Cadet Blanchet, and tell him to beat me and not to scold you on my account. When you go into the fields, I shall always go with you to carry your little boy, and amuse him all day. I shall do all you tell me, and if I do any wrong, you need no longer love me. But do not let me be sent away; I do not want to go; I should rather jump into the river."

Poor François looked at the river, and ran so near it, that they saw his life hung by a thread, and that a single word of refusal would be enough to make him drown himself. Madeleine pleaded for the child, and Zabelle was dying to listen to her. Now that she was near the mill, matters looked differently.

"Well, I will keep you, you naughty child," said she; "but I shall be on the road to-morrow, begging my bread because of you. You are too stupid to know it is your fault that I shall be reduced to such a condition, and this is what I have gained by burdening myself with a child who is no good to me, and does not even pay for the bread he eats."

"You have said enough, Zabelle," said the miller's wife, taking the child in her arms to lift him from the ground, although he was very heavy. "There are ten crowns for you to pay your rent with, or to move elsewhere, if my husband persists in driving you away from here. It is my own money—money that I have earned myself. I know that it will be required of me, but no matter. They may kill me if they want; I buy this child, he is mine, he is yours no longer. You do not deserve to keep a child with such a warm heart, and who loves you so much. I shall be his mother, and my family must submit. I am willing to suffer everything for my children. I could be cut in pieces for my Jeannie, and I could endure as much for this child, too. Come, poor François, you are no longer a waif, do you hear? You have a mother, and you can love her as much as you choose, for she will love you with her whole heart in return."

Madeleine said all this without being perfectly aware of what she was saying. She whose disposition was so gentle was now highly excited. Her heart rebelled against Zabelle, and she was really angry with her. François had thrown his arms round the neck of the miller's wife, and clasped her so tight that she lost her breath; and at the same time her cap and neckerchief were stained with blood, for his head was cut in several places.

Madeleine was so deeply affected, and was filled with so much pity, dismay, sorrow, and determination at once, that she set out to walk toward the mill with as much courage as a soldier advancing under fire. Without considering that the child was heavy, and she herself so weak that she could hardly carry her small Jeannie, she attempted to cross the unsteady little bridge that sank under her weight. When she reached the middle, she stopped. The child was so heavy that she swerved slightly, and drops of perspiration started from her forehead. She felt as if she should fall from weakness, when suddenly she called to mind a beautiful and marvellous story that she had read the evening before in an old volume of the *Lives of the Saints.*

It was the story of Saint Christopher, who carried the child Jesus across the river, and found him so heavy that he stopped in fear. She looked down at the waif. His eyes had rolled back in his head, and his arms had relaxed their hold. The poor child had either undergone too much emotion, or he had lost too much blood, and had fainted.

Marin County Free Library
Civic Center Administration Building
San Rafael, California

CHAPTER IV

When Zabelle saw him thus, she thought he was dead. All her love for him returned, and with no more thought of the miller or his wicked old mother, she seized the child from Madeleine, and began to kiss him, with sobs and cries. They sat down beside the river, and, laying him across their knees, they washed his wounds and stanched the blood with their handkerchiefs; but they had nothing with which to bring him to. Madeleine warmed his head against her bosom, and breathed on his face and into his mouth as people do with the drowned. This revived him, and as soon as he opened his eyes and saw what care they were taking of him, he kissed Madeleine and Zabelle, one after the other, so passionately that they were obliged to check him, fearing that he might faint again.

"Come, come," said Zabelle, "we must go home. No, I can never, never leave that child; I see now, and I shall never think of it again. I shall keep your ten crowns, Madeleine, so I can pay my rent to-night if I am forced to do so. Do not tell about it; I shall go to-morrow to the lady in Presles, so that she may not inform against you, and she can say, in case of need, that she has not as yet given you the price of your spinning. In this way we shall gain time, and I shall try so hard that, even if I have to beg for it, I shall succeed in paying my debt to you, so that you need not suffer on my account. You cannot take this child to the mill; your husband would kill him. Leave him to me; I swear to you that I shall take as good care of him as before, and if we are tormented any further, we can think of something else."

It came to pass that the waif's return was effected without disturbance, and without exciting attention; for it happened that Mother Blanchet had just fallen ill of a stroke of apoplexy, without having had an opportunity of telling her son what she had exacted from Zabelle about the waif, and Master Blanchet sent in all haste for Zabelle to come and help in the household, while Madeleine and the servant were taking care of his mother. For three days everything was in confusion at the mill. Madeleine did not spare herself, and watched for three nights at the bedside of her husband's mother, who died in her arms.

This blow allayed the miller's bad temper for some time. He had loved his mother as much as he was capable of loving, and his vanity was concerned in making as fine a funeral for her as his means allowed. He forgot his mistress for the required time, and with pretended generosity distributed his dead mother's clothes to the poor neighbours. Zabelle had her share of the alms, and the waif received a franc piece, because Blanchet remembered that once, when they were in urgent need of leeches for the sick woman, and everybody was running futilely hither and thither to look for them, the waif went off, without saying a word, to fish some out of a pool where he knew they were, and brought them back in less time than it took the others to start out for them.

So Cadet Blanchet gradually forgot his dislike, and nobody at the mill knew of Zabelle's freak of sending back the waif to the asylum. The question of Madeleine's ten crowns came up later, for the miller did not neglect to make Zabelle pay the rent for her wretched cottage. Madeleine said that she had lost them as she ran home through the fields, on hearing of her mother-in-law's accident. Blanchet made a long search for them and scolded a great deal, but he never found out the use to which the money had been put, and Zabelle was not suspected.

After his mother's death, Blanchet's disposition changed little by little, though not for the better. He found life still more tedious at home, was less observant of what went on, and less niggardly in his expenditure. He no longer earned anything, and, in proportion as he grew fat, led a disorderly life, and cared no more for his work. He looked to make his profit by dishonest bargains and unfair dealings, which would have enriched him, if he had not spent on one hand what he gained on the other. His mistress acquired more ascendency over him every day. She took him with her to fairs and feasts, induced him to engage in petty trickeries, and spend his time at the tavern. He learned how to gamble, and was often lucky; but it would have been better for him to lose always than acquire this unfortunate taste; for his dissipations threw him entirely off his balance, and at the most trifling loss, he became furious with himself, and ill-tempered toward everybody else.

While he was leading this wretched life, his wife, always wise and good, governed the house and tenderly reared their only child. But she thought herself doubly a mother, for she loved and watched over the waif almost as much as if he were her own. As her husband became more dissolute, she was less miserable and more her own mistress. In the beginning of his licentious career he was still very churlish, because he dreaded reproaches, and wished to hold his wife in a state of fear and subjection. When he saw that she was by nature an enemy to strife, and showed no jealousy, he made up his mind to leave her in peace. As his mother was no longer there to stir him up against her, be was obliged to recognise that no other woman was as thrifty as Madeleine. He grew accustomed to spend whole weeks away from home, and whenever he came back in the mood for a quarrel, he met with a mute patience that turned away his wrath, and he was first astonished and ended by going to sleep. So finally he came to see his wife only when he was tired and in need of rest.

Madeleine must have been a very Christian woman to live thus alone with an old servant and two children, and perhaps she was a still better Christian than if she had been a nun. God had given her the great privilege of learning to read, and of understanding what she read. Yet she always read the same thing, for she possessed only two books, the Holy Gospel and an abbreviated copy of the *Lives of the Saints*. The Gospel sanctified her, and saddened her to tears, when she read alone in the evening beside her son's bed. The *Lives of the Saints* produced a different effect upon her; it was just as when idle people read stories and excite themselves over dreams and illusions. These beautiful tales inspired her with courage and even gaiety. Sometimes, out in the fields, the waif saw her smile and flush, when she had her book in her lap. He wondered at it, and found it hard to understand how the stories which she told him, with some little alteration in order to adapt them to his capacity (and also perhaps because she could not perfectly grasp them from beginning to end), could come from that thing which she called her book. He wanted to read, too, and learned so quickly and well that she was amazed, and in his turn he was able to teach little Jeannie. When François was old enough to make his first communion, Madeleine helped him with his catechism, and the parish priest was delighted with the intelligence and excellent memory of this child, who had always passed for a simpleton, because he was very shy and never had anything to say.

After his first communion, and he was old enough to be hired out, Zabelle was pleased to have him engaged as servant at the mill; and Master Blanchet made no opposition, because it was plain to all that the waif was a good boy, very industrious and obliging, and stronger, more alert and sensible than the other children of his age. Then, too, he was satisfied with ten crowns for wages, and it was an economical arrangement for the miller. François was very happy to be entirely in the service of Madeleine and the dear little Jeannie he loved so much, and when he found that Zabelle could pay for her farm with his earnings, and thus be relieved of her most besetting care, he thought himself as rich as a king.

Unfortunately, poor Zabelle could not long enjoy her reward. At the beginning of the winter, she fell seriously ill, and in spite of receiving every care from the waif and Madeleine, she died on Candlemas Day, after having so far recovered that they thought her well again. Madeleine sorrowed and wept for her sincerely, but she tried to comfort the poor waif, who but for her would have been inconsolable.

Even after a year's time, he still thought of her every day, and almost every instant. Once he said to the miller's wife:

"I feel a kind of remorse when I pray for my poor mother's soul; it is because I did not love her enough. I am very sure that I always did my best to please her, that I never said any but kind words to her, and that I served her in all ways as I serve you; but I must confess something, Madame Blanchet, which troubles me, and for which, in secret, I often ask God's forgiveness. Ever since the day my poor mother wanted to send me back to the asylum, and you took my part, and prevented her doing so, my love for her, against my will, grew less. I was not angry with her; I did not allow myself even to think that she was wrong in trying to rid herself of me. It was her right to do so; I stood in her way; she was afraid of your mother-in-law, and after all she did it very reluctantly; for I could see that she loved me greatly. In some way or other, the idea keeps recurring to my mind, and I cannot drive it away. From the moment you said to me those words which I shall never forget, I loved you more than her, and in spite of all I could do, I thought of you more often than of her. She is dead now, and I did not die of grief as I should if you died!"

"What were the words I said, my poor child, that made you love me so much? I do not remember them."

"You do not remember them?" said the waif, sitting down at the feet of Madeleine, who was turning her wheel as she listened. "When you gave the crowns to my mother, you said: 'There, I buy that child of you; he is mine!' And then you kissed me and said; 'Now you are no longer a waif; you have a mother who will love you as if you were her own!' Did not you say so, Madame Blanchet?"

"If I did, I said what I meant, and am still of the same mind. Do you think I have failed to keep my word?"

"Oh, no! only——"

"Only what?"

"No. I cannot tell you, for it is wrong to complain and be thankless and ungrateful."

"I know that you cannot be ungrateful, and I want you to say what you have on your mind. Come, in what respect don't I treat you like my own child? I order you to tell me, as I should order Jeannie."

"Well, it is--it is that you kiss Jeannie very often, and have never kissed me since the day we were just speaking of. Yet I am careful to keep my face and hands very clean, because I know that you do not like dirty children, and are always running after Jeannie to wash and comb him. But this does not make you kiss me any more, and my mother Zabelle did not kiss me either. I see that other mothers caress their children, and so I know that I am always a waif, and that you cannot forget it."

"Come and kiss me, François," said the miller's wife, making the child sit on her knees and kissing him with much feeling. "It is true that I did wrong never to think of it, and you deserved better of me. You see now that I kiss you with all my heart, and you are very sure that you are not a waif, are not you?"

The child flung his arms round Madeleine's neck, and turned so pale that she was surprised, and putting him down gently from her lap, tried to distract his attention. After a minute, he left her, and ran off to hide. The miller's wife felt some uneasiness, and making a search for him, she finally found him on his knees, in a corner of the barn, bathed in tears.

"What does this mean, François?" said she, raising him up. "I don't know what is the matter with you. If you are thinking of your poor mother Zabelle, you had better say a prayer for her, and then you will feel more at rest."

"No, no," said the child, twisting the end of Madeleine's apron, and kissing it with all his might. "Are not you my mother?"

"Why are you crying, then? You give me pain!"

"Oh, no! oh, no! I am not crying," answered François, drying his eyes quickly, and looking up cheerfully; "I mean, I do not know why I was crying. Truly, I cannot understand it, for I am as happy as if I were in heaven."

CHAPTER V

From that day on Madeleine kissed the child, morning and evening, neither more nor less than if he had been her own, and the only difference she made between Jeannie and François was that the younger was the more petted and spoiled as became his age. He was only seven, while the waif was twelve, and François understood perfectly that a big boy like him could not be caressed like a little one. Besides, they were still more unlike in looks than in years. François was so tall and strong that he passed for fifteen, and Jeannie was small and slender like his mother, whom he greatly resembled.

It happened one morning, when she had just received François's greeting on her doorstep, and had kissed him as usual, her servant said to her:

"I mean no offence, my good mistress, but it seems to me that boy is very big to let you kiss him as if he were a little girl."

"Do you think so?" answered Madeleine, in astonishment. "Don't you know how young he is?"

"Yes, and I should not see any harm in it, except that he is a waif, and though I am only your servant, I would not be hired to kiss any such riff-raff."

"What you say is wrong, Catherine," returned Madame Blanchet; "and above all, you should not say it before the poor child."

"She may say it, and everybody else may say it, too," replied François, boldly. "I don't care; if I am not a waif for you, Madame Blanchet, I am very well satisfied."

"Only hear him!" said the servant. "This is the first time I ever knew him to talk so much at once. Then you know how to put two or three words together, do you, François? I really thought you could not even understand what other people said. If I had known that you were listening, I should not have spoken before you as I did, for I have no idea of hurting your feelings. You are a good, quiet, obliging boy. Come, you must not think of it any more; if it seems odd to me for our mistress to kiss you, it is only because you are too big for it, and so much coddling makes you look sillier than you really are."

Having tried to mend matters in this way, big Catherine set about making her soup, and forgot all about what had passed.

The waif followed Madeleine to the place where she did her washing, and sitting down beside her, he spoke as he knew how to speak with her and for her alone.

"Do you remember, Madame Blanchet," said he, "how I was here once, long ago, and you let me go to sleep in your shawl?"

"Yes, my child," said she, "it was the first time we ever saw each other."

"Was it the first time? I was not certain, for I cannot recollect very well; when I think of that time, it is all like a dream. How many years ago is it?"

"It is—wait a minute—it is nearly six years, for my Jeannie was fourteen months old."

"So I was not so old then as he is now? When he has made his first communion, do you think he will remember all that is happening to him now?"

"Oh! yes, I shall be sure to remember," cried Jeannie.

"That may be so or not," said François. "What were you doing yesterday at this hour?"

Jeannie was startled, and opened his mouth to answer; then he stopped short, much abashed.

"Well! I wager that you cannot give a better account of yourself, either," said the miller's wife to François. She always took pleasure in listening to the prattle of the two children.

"I?" said the waif, embarrassed, "wait a moment—I was going to the fields, and passed by this very place—I was thinking of you. Indeed, it was yesterday that the day when you wrapped me up in your shawl came into my mind."

"You have a good memory, and it is surprising that you can remember so far back. Can you remember that you were ill with fever?"

"No, indeed!"

"And that you carried home my linen without my asking you?"

"No."

"I have always remembered it, because that was the way I found out how good your heart was."

"I have a good heart, too, haven't I, mother?" said little Jeannie, presenting his mother with an apple which he had half eaten.

"To be sure you have, and you must try to copy François in all the good things you see him do."

"Oh, yes!" answered the child quickly, "I shall jump on the yellow colt this evening, and shall ride it into pasture."

"Shall you?" said François, laughing. "Are you, too, going to climb up the great ash-tree to hunt tomtits? I shall let you do it, my little follow! But listen, Madame Blanchet, there is something I want to ask of you, but I do not know whether you will tell it to me."

"Let me hear."

"Why do they think they hurt my feelings when they call me a waif? Is there any harm in being a waif?"

"No; certainly not, my child, since it is no fault of yours."

"Whose fault is it?"

"It is the fault of the rich people."

"The fault of the rich people! What does that mean?"

"You are asking a great many questions to-day; I shall answer you by and by."

"No, no; right away, Madame Blanchet."

"I cannot explain it to you. In the first place, do you know yourself what it is to be a waif?"

"Yes; it is being put in a foundling asylum by your father and mother, because they have no money to feed you and bring you up."

"Yes, that is it. So you see that there are people so wretched as not to be able to bring up their own children, and that is the fault of the rich who do not help them."

"You are right!" answered the waif very thoughtfully. "Yet there are some good rich people, since you are one, Madame Blanchet, and it is only necessary to fall in their way."

CHAPTER VI

NEVERTHELESS, the waif, who was always musing and trying to find reasons for everything since he had learned to read and had made his first communion, kept pondering over what Catherine had said to Madame Blanchet about him; but it was in vain that he reflected, for he could never understand why, now that he was growing older, he should no longer kiss Madeleine. He was the most innocent boy in the world, and had no suspicion of what boys of his age learn all too quickly in the country.

His great simplicity of mind was the result of his singular bringing-up. He had never felt his position as a foundling to be a disgrace, but it had made him very shy; for though he had not taken the title as an insult, he was always surprised to find he possessed a characteristic which made a difference between himself and those with whom he associated. Foundlings are apt to be humbled by their fate, which is generally thrust upon them so harshly that they lose early their self-respect as Christians. They grow up full of hatred toward those who brought them into the world, not to speak of those who helped them to remain in it. It happened, however, that François had fallen into the hands of Zabelle, who loved him and treated him with kindness, and afterward he had met with Madeleine, who was the most charitable and compassionate of women. She had been a good mother to him, and a waif who receives affection is better than other children, just as he is worse when he is abused and degraded.

François had never known any amusement or perfect content except when in the company of Madeleine, and instead of running off with the other shepherd boys for his recreation, he had grown up quite solitary, or tied to the apron-strings of the two women who loved him. Especially when with Madeleine, he was as happy as Jeannie could be, and he was in no haste to play with the other children, who were sure to call him a waif, and with whom he soon felt himself a stranger, though he could not tell why.

So he reached the age of fifteen without any knowledge of wrong or conception of evil; his lips had never uttered an unclean word, nor had his ears taken in the meaning of one. Yet, since the day that Catherine had censured his mistress for the affection she showed him, the child had the great good sense and judgment to forego his morning kiss from the miller's wife. He pretended to forget about it, or perhaps to be ashamed of being coddled like a little girl, as Catherine had said. But at the bottom, he had no such false shame, and he would have laughed at the idea, had he not guessed that the sweet woman he loved might incur blame on his account. Why should she be blamed? He could not understand it, and though he saw that he could never find it out by himself, he shrank from asking Madeleine for an explanation. He knew that her strength of love and kindness of heart had enabled her to endure the carping of others; for he had a good memory, and recollected that Madeleine had been upbraided, and had narrowly escaped blows in former years because of her goodness to him.

Now, owing to his good instincts, he spared her the annoyance of being rebuked and ridiculed on his account. He understood, and it is wonderful that the poor child could understand, that a waif was to be loved only in secret; and rather than cause any trouble to Madeleine, he would have consented to do without her love.

He was attentive to his work, and as, in proportion as he grew older, he had more to do, it happened that he was less and less with Madeleine. He did not grieve for this, for, as he toiled, he said to himself that it was for her, and that he would have his reward in seeing her at meals. In the evening, when Jeannie was asleep and Catherine had gone to bed, François still stayed up with Madeleine while she worked, and read aloud to her, or talked with her. Peasants do not read very fast, so that the two books they had were quite sufficient for them. When they read three pages in an evening they thought it was a great deal, and when the book was finished, so much time had passed since the beginning that they could take it up again at the first page without finding it too familiar. There are two ways of reading, and it may not be amiss to say so to those persons who think themselves well educated. Those who have much time to themselves and many books, devour so many of them and cram so much stuff into their heads, that they are utterly confused; but those who have neither leisure nor libraries are happy when a good book falls into their hands. They begin it over again a thousand times without weariness, and every time something strikes them which they had not observed before. In the main, the idea is always the same, but it is so much dwelt upon, so thoroughly enjoyed and digested, that the single mind which possesses it is better fed and more healthy than thirty thousand brains full of wind and twaddle. What I am telling you, my children, I have from the parish priest, who knows all about it.

So these two persons lived happy with what they had to consume in the matter of learning; and they consumed it slowly, helping each other to understand and love all that makes us just and good. Thus they grew in piety and courage; and they had no greater joy than to feel themselves at peace with all the world, and to be of one mind at all times and in all places, on the subject of the truth and the desire of holy living.

CHAPTER VII

Master Blanchet was no longer particular concerning his household expenses, because he had fixed the amount of money which he gave to his wife every month for her housekeeping, and made it as little as possible. Madeleine could, without displeasing him, deprive herself of her own comfort in order to give alms to the poor about her; sometimes a little wood, another time part of her own dinner, again some vegetables, some clothing, some eggs, and so on. She spent all she had in the service of her neighbours, and when her money was exhausted, she did with her own hands the work of the poor, so as to save the lives of those among them who were ill and worn out. She was so economical, and mended her old clothes so carefully, that she appeared to live comfortably; and yet she was so anxious that her family should not suffer for what she gave away, that she accustomed herself to eat scarcely anything, never to rest, and to sleep as little as possible. The waif saw all this, and thought it quite natural; for it was in his character, as well as in the education he received from Madeleine, to feel the same inclination, and to be drawn toward the same duty. Sometimes, only, he was troubled by the great hardships which the miller's wife endured, and blamed himself for sleeping and eating too much. He would gladly have spent the night sewing and spinning in her place; and when she tried to pay him his wages, which had risen to nearly twenty crowns, he refused to take them, and obliged her to keep them without the miller's knowledge.

"If my mother Zabelle were alive," said he, "this money would be for her. What do you expect me to do with it?

I have no need of it, since you take care of my clothes, and provide me with sabots. Keep it for somebody more unfortunate than I am. You work so hard for the poor already, and if you give money to me, you must work still harder. If you should fall ill and die like poor Zabelle, I should like to know what good it would do me to have my chest full of money. Would it bring you back again, or prevent me from throwing myself in the river?"

"You do not know what you are talking about, my child," said Madeleine, one day that this idea returned to his mind, as happened from time to time. "It is not a Christian act to kill oneself, and if I should die, it would be your duty to live after me to comfort and help my Jeannie. Should not you do that for me?"

"Yes, as long as Jeannie was a child and needed my love. But afterward! Do not let us speak of this, Madame Blanchet. I cannot be a good Christian on this point. Do not tire yourself out, and do not die, if you want me to live on this earth."

"You may set your mind at ease, for I have no wish to die. I am well. I am hardened to work, and now I am even stronger than I was in my youth."

"In your youth!" exclaimed François in astonishment. "Are not you young, then?"

And he was afraid lest she might have reached the age for dying.

"I think I never had time to be young," answered Madeleine, laughing like one who meets misfortune bravely. "Now I am twenty-five years old, and that is a good deal for a woman of my make; for I was not born strong like you, my boy, and I have had sorrows which have aged me more than years."

"Sorrows! Heavens, yes! I knew it very well, when Monsieur Blanchet used to speak so roughly to you. God forgive me! I am not a wicked boy, yet once when he raised his hand against you as if to strike you—Oh! he did well to change his mind, for I had seized a flail—nobody had noticed me—and I was going to fall upon him. But that was a long time ago, Madame Blanchet, for I remember that I was much shorter than he then, and now I can look right over his head. And now that he scarcely speaks to you any more, Madame Blanchet, you are no longer unhappy, are you? "

" So you think I am no longer unhappy, do you? " said Madeleine rather sharply, thinking how it was that there had never been any love in her marriage. Then she checked herself, for what she was going to say was no concern of the waif's, and she had no right to put such ideas into a child's head.

" You are right," said she; " I am no longer unhappy. I live as I please. My husband is much kinder to me; my son is well and strong, and I have nothing to complain of."

" Then don't I enter into your calculations? I——"

" You? You are well and strong, too, and that pleases me."

" Don't I please you in any other way? "

" Yes, you are a good boy; you are always right-minded, and I am satisfied with you."

" Oh! if you were not satisfied with me, what a scamp, what a good-for-nothing I should be, after the way in which you have treated me! But there is still something else which ought to make you happy, if you think as I do."

" Very well, tell me; for I do not know what puzzle you are contriving for me."

" I mean no puzzle, Madame Blanchet. I need but look into my heart, and I see that even if I had to suffer hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, and were to be beaten half to death every day into the bargain, and then had only a bundle of thorns or a heap of stones to lie on—well, can you understand? "

" I think so, my dear François; you could be happy in spite of so much evil if only your heart were at peace with God."

"Of course that is true, and I need not speak of it. But I meant something else."

"I cannot imagine what you are aiming at, and I see that you are cleverer than I am."

"No, I am not clever. I mean that I could suffer all the pains that a man living mortal life can endure, and could still be happy if I thought Madame Blanchet loved me. That is the reason why I just said to you that if you thought as I did, you would say: "François loves me, and I am content to be alive.'"

"You are right, my poor dear child," answered Madeleine; "and the things you say to me sometimes make me want to cry. Yes, truly, your affection for me is one of the joys of my life, and perhaps the greatest, after—no, I mean with my Jeannie's. As you are older than he, you can understand better what I say to you, and you can better explain your thoughts to me. I assure you that I am never wearied when I am with both of you, and the only prayer I make to God is, that we may long be able to live together as we do now, without separating."

"Without separating, I should think so!" said François. "I should rather be cut into little pieces than leave you. Who else would love me as you have loved me? Who would run the danger of being ill-treated for the sake of a poor waif, and who would call me her child, her dear son? For you call me so often, almost always. You often say to me when we are alone: 'Call me *mother*, and not always Madame Blanchet.' I do not dare to do so, because I am afraid of becoming accustomed to it and letting it slip out before somebody."

"Well, even if you did so?"

"Oh! you would be sure to be blamed for it, and I do not like to have you tormented on my account. I am not proud, and I do not care to have it known that you have raised me from my orphan estate. I am satisfied to know, all by myself, that I have a mother and am her child. Oh! you must not die, Madame Blanchet," added poor François, looking at her sadly, for his thoughts had long been running on possible calamity. "If I lost you, I should have no other friend on this earth; you would go straight into Paradise, and I am not sure that I deserve ever to receive the reward of going there with you."

François had a kind of foreboding of heavy misfortune in all he said and thought, and some little time afterward the misfortune fell.

He had become the servant of the mill, and it was his duty to make the round of the customers of the mill to carry their corn away on his horse and return it to them in flour. This sometimes obliged him to take long rides, and for this same purpose he often visited Blanchet's mistress, who lived about a league from the mill. He was not at all fond of this commission, and would never linger an instant in her house after her corn was weighed and measured.

. . . .

At this point of the tale the narrator stopped.

"Are you aware that I have been talking a long time?" said she to her friends, who were listening. "My lungs are not so strong as they once were, and I think that the hemp-dresser, who knows the story better than I, might relieve me, especially as we have just come to a place that I do not remember so well."

"I know why your memory is not so good in the middle as in the beginning," answered the hemp-dresser. "It is because the waif is about to get into trouble, and you cannot stand it, because you are chicken-hearted about love stories, like all other pious women."

"Is this going to turn into a love story?" asked Sylvine Courtioux, who happened to be present.

"Good!" replied the hemp-dresser. "I knew that if I let out that word, all the young girls would prick up their ears. But you must have patience; the part of the story which I am going to take up on condition that I may carry it to a happy close is not yet what you want to hear. Where had you come to, Mother Monique?"

"I had come to Blanchet's mistress."

"That was it," said the hemp-dresser. The woman was called Sévère, but her name was not well suited to her, for there was nothing to match it in her disposition. She was very clever about hoodwinking people when she wanted to get money out of them. She cannot be called entirely bad, for she was of a joyous, careless temper; but she thought only of herself, and cared not at all for the loss of others, provided that she had all the finery and recreation she wanted. She had been the fashion in the country, and it was said that she had found many men to her taste. She was still a very handsome, buxom woman, alert though stout, and rosy as a cherry. She paid but little attention to the waif, and if she met him in her barn or court-yard she made fun of him with some nonsense or other, but without malicious intent and for the pleasure of seeing him blush; for he blushed like a girl, and was ill at ease whenever she spoke to him. He thought her brazen, and she seemed both ugly and wicked in his eyes, though she was neither one nor the other; at least, she was only spiteful when she was crossed in her interests or her vanity, and I must even acknowledge that she liked to give almost as much as to receive. She was ostentatiously generous, and enjoyed being thanked; but to the mind of the waif she was a devil, who reduced Madame Blanchet to want and drudgery.

Nevertheless, it happened that when the waif was seventeen years old, Madame Sévère discovered that he was a deucedly handsome fellow. He was not like most country boys, who, at his age, are dumpy and thick-set, and only develop into something worth looking at two or three years later. He was already tall and well-built; his skin was white, even at harvest-time, and his tight curling hair was brown at the roots and golden at the ends.

"Do you admire that sort of thing, Madame Monique? I mean the hair, without any reference to boys."

"That is no business of yours," answered the priest's, servant. "Go on with your story."

He was always poorly dressed, but he loved cleanliness, as Madeleine Blanchet had taught him; and such as he was, he had an air that no one else had. Sévère noticed this little by little, and finally she was so well aware of it that she took it into her head to thaw him out a little. She was not a woman of prejudice, and when she heard anybody say, "What a pity that such a handsome boy should be a waif!" she answered, "There is every reason that waifs should be handsome, for love brought them into the world."

She devised the following plan for being in his company. She made Blanchet drink immoderately at the fair of Saint-Denis-de-Jouhet, and when she saw that he was no longer able to put one foot before the other, she asked the friends she had in the place to put him to bed. Then she said to François, who had come with his master to drive his animals to the fair:

"My lad, I am going to leave my mare for your master to return with to-morrow morning; you may mount his and take me home on the crupper."

This arrangement was not at all to François's taste. He said that the mare that belonged to the mill was not strong enough to carry two people, and he offered to accompany Sévère home, if she rode her own horse and allowed him to ride Blanchet's. He promised to come back immediately with a fresh mount for his master, and to reach Saint-Denis-de-Jouhet early the next morning; but Sévère would listen to him no more than the wind, and ordered him to obey her. François was afraid of her; for, as Blanchet saw with no eyes but hers, she could have him sent away from the mill if he displeased her, especially as the feast of Saint-Jean was near at hand. So he took her up behind him, without suspecting, poor fellow, that this was not the best means of escaping his evil destiny.

CHAPTER VIII

It was twilight when they set out, and when they passed the sluice of the pond of Rochefolle night had already fallen. The moon had not yet risen above the trees, and in that part of the country the roads are so washed by numerous springs that they are not at all good. François spurred his mare on to speed, for he disliked the company of Sévère, and longed to be with Madame Blanchet.

But Sévère, who was in no haste to reach home, began to play the part of a fine lady, saying that she was afraid, and that the mare must not go faster than a walk, because she did not lift her legs well and might stumble at any minute.

"Bah!" said François without paying any attention; "then it would be the first time she said her prayers, for I never saw a mare so disinclined to piety!"

"You are witty, François," said Sévère giggling, as if François had said something very new and amusing.

"Oh, no indeed!" answered the waif, who thought she was laughing at him.

"Come," said she, "you surely cannot mean to trot down-hill?"

"You need not fear, for we can trot perfectly well."

The trot down-hill stopped the stout Sévère's breath, and prevented her talking. She was extremely vexed, as she had expected to coax the young man with her soft words, but she was unwilling to let him see that she was neither young nor slender enough to stand fatigue, and was silent for a part of the way.

When they came to a chestnut grove, she took it into her head to say:

"Stop, François; you must stop, dear François. The mare has just lost a shoe."

"Even if she has lost a shoe," said François, "I have neither hammer nor nails to put it on with."

"But we must not lose the shoe. It is worth something! Get down, I say, and look for it."

"I might look two hours for it, among these ferns, without finding it. And my eyes are not lanterns."

"Oh, yes, François," said Sévère, half in jest and half in earnest; "your eyes shine like glow-worms."

"Then you can see them through my hat, I suppose?" answered François, not at all pleased with what he took for derision.

"I cannot see them just now," said Sévère with a sigh as big as herself; "but I have seen them at other times!"

"You can never have seen anything amiss in them," returned the innocent waif. "You may as well leave them alone, for they have never looked rudely at you and never will."

"I think," broke in at this moment the priest's servant, "that you might skip this part of the story. It is not very interesting to hear all the bad devices of this wicked woman for ensnaring our waif."

"Put yourself at ease, Mother Monique," replied the hemp-dresser. "I shall skip as much as is proper. I know that I am speaking before young people, and I shall not say a word too much."

We were just speaking of François's eyes, the expression of which Sévère was trying to make less irreproachable than he had declared it to be.

"How old are you, François?" said she with more politeness, so as to let him understand that she was no longer going to treat him like a little boy.

"Oh, Heavens! I don't know exactly," answered the waif, beginning to perceive her clumsy advances. "I do not often amuse myself by reckoning my years."

"I heard that you were only seventeen," she resumed, "but I wager that you must be twenty, for you are tall, and will soon have a beard on your chin."

"It is all the same to me," said François, yawning.

"Take care! You are going too fast, my boy. There! I have just lost my purse!"

"The deuce you have!" said François, who had not as yet discovered how sly she was. "Then I suppose that you must get off and look for it, for it may be of value."

He jumped down and helped her to dismount. She took pains to lean against him, and he found her heavier than a sack of corn.

While she pretended to search for the purse, which was all the time in her pocket, he went on five or six steps, holding the mare by the bridle.

"Are not you going to help me look for it?" said she.

"I must hold the mare," said he, "for she is thinking of her colt, and if I let her loose she will run home."

Sévère looked under the mare's leg, close beside François, and from this he saw that she had lost nothing except her senses.

"We had not come as far as this," said he, "when you called out that you had lost your purse. So you certainly cannot find it here."

"Do you think I am shamming, you rogue?" said she, trying to pull his ear; "for I really believe that you are a rogue."

François drew back, as he was in no mood for a frolic.

"No, no," said he, "if you have found your money, let us go, for I should rather be asleep than stay here jesting."

"Then we can talk," said Sévère, when she was seated again behind him; "they say that beguiles the weariness of the road."

"I need no beguiling," answered the waif, "for I am not weary."

"That is the first pretty speech you have made me, François!"

"If it is a pretty speech, I made it by accident, for I do not understand that sort of thing."

Sévère was exasperated, but she would not as yet give in to the truth.

"The boy must be a simpleton," said she to herself. "If I make him lose his way, he will have to stay a little longer with me."

So she tried to mislead him, and to induce him to turn to the left when he was going to the right.

"You are making a mistake," said she; "this is the first time you have been over this road. I know it better than you do. Take my advice, or you will make me spend the night in the woods, young man!"

When François had once been over a road, he knew it so perfectly that he could find his way in it at the end of a year.

"No, no," said he, "this is the right way, and I am not in the least out of my head. The mare knows it too, and I have no desire to spend the night rambling about the woods."

Thus he reached the farm of Dollins, where Sévère lived, without losing a quarter of an hour and without giving an opening as wide as the eye of a needle to her advances. Once there, she tried to detain him, insisting that the night was dark, that the water had risen, and that he would have difficulty in crossing the fords. The waif cared not a whit for these dangers, and, bored with so many foolish words, he struck the mare with his heels, galloped off without waiting to hear the rest, and returned swiftly to the mill, where Madeleine Blanchet was waiting for him, grieved that he should come so late.

CHAPTER IX

THE waif never told Madeleine what Sévère had given him to understand; he would not have dared, and indeed dared not even think of it himself. I cannot say that I should have behaved as discreetly as he in such an adventure; but a little discretion never does any harm, and then I am telling things as they happened. This boy was as refined as a well-brought-up girl.

As Madame Sévère thought over the matter at night she became incensed against him, and perceived that he had scorned her and was not the fool she had taken him for. Chafing at this thought, her spleen rose, and great projects of revenge passed through her head.

So much so that when Cadet Blanchet, still half drunk, returned to her next morning, she gave him to understand that his mill-boy was a little upstart, whom she had been obliged to hold in check and cuff in the face, because he had taken it into his head to make love to her and kiss her as they came home together through the wood at night.

This was more than enough to disorder Blanchet's wits; but she was not yet satisfied, and jeered at him for leaving at home with his wife a fellow who would be inclined by his age and character to beguile the dullness of her life.

In the twinkling of an eye, Blanchet was jealous both of his mistress and his wife. He seized his heavy stick, pulled his hat down over his eyes, like an extinguisher on a candle, and rushed off to the mill, without stopping for breath.

Fortunately, the waif was not there. He had gone away to fell and saw up a tree that Blanchet had bought from Blanchard of Guérin, and was not to return till evening. Blanchet would have gone to find him at his work, but he shrank from showing his fury before the young millers of Guérin, lest they should make sport of him for his jealousy, which was unreasonable after his long neglect and contempt of his wife.

He would have stayed to wait for his return, but he thought it too wearisome to stay all day at home, and he knew that the quarrel which he wished to pick with his wife could not last long enough to occupy him till evening. It is impossible to be angry very long when the ill-temper is all on one side.

In spite of this, however, he could have endured all the derision and the tedium for the pleasure of belabouring the poor waif; but as his walk had cooled him to some degree, he reflected that this cursed waif was no longer a child, and that if he were old enough to think of making love, he was also old enough to defend himself with blows, if provoked. So he tried to gather his wits together, drinking glass after glass in silence, revolving in his brain what he was going to say to his wife, but did not know how to begin.

He had said roughly, on entering, that he wished her to listen to something; so she sat near him, as usual, sad, silent, and with a tinge of pride in her manner.

"Madame Blanchet," said he at last, "I have a command to give you, but if you were the woman you pretend to be, and that you have the reputation of being, you would not wait to be told."

There he halted as if to take breath, but the fact is that he was almost ashamed of what he was going to say, for virtue was wrtten on his wife's face as plainly as a prayer in a missal.

Madeleine would not help him to explain himself. She did not breathe a word, but waited for him to go on, expecting him to find fault with her for some expenditure, for she had no suspicion of what he was meditating.

"You behave as if you did not understand me, Madame Blanchet," continued the miller, "and yet my meaning is clear. You must throw that rubbish out of doors, the sooner the better, for I have had enough and too much of all this sort of thing."

"Throw what?" asked Madeleine, in amazement.

"Throw what! Then you do not dare to say throw *whom?*"

"Good God! no; I know nothing about it," said she. "Speak, if you want me to understand you."

"You will make me lose my temper," cried Cadet Blanchet, bellowing like a bull. "I tell you that waif is not wanted in my house, and if he is still here by to-morrow morning, I shall turn him out of doors by main force, unless he prefer to take a turn under my mill-wheel."

"Your words are cruel, and your purpose is very foolish, Master Blanchet," said Madeleine, who could not help turning as white as her cap. "You will ruin your business if you send the boy away; for you will never find another who will work so well, and be satisfied with such small wages. What has the poor child done to make you want to drive him away so cruelly?"

"He makes a fool of me, I tell you, Madame Wife, and I do not intend to be the laughing-stock of the country. He has made himself master of my house, and deserves to be paid with a cudgel for what he has done."

It was some time before Madeleine could understand what her husband meant. She had not the slightest conception of it, and brought forward all the reasons she could think of to appease him and prevent his persisting in his caprice.

It was all labour lost, for he only grew the more furious; and when he saw how grieved she was to lose her good servant François, he had a fresh access of jealousy, and spoke so brutally that his meaning dawned on her at last, and she began to cry from mortification, injured pride, and bitter sorrow.

This did not mend matters; Blanchet swore that she was in love with this bundle of goods from the asylum, that he blushed for her, and that if she did not turn the waif out of doors without delay, he would kill him and grind him to powder.

Thereupon she answered more haughtily than was her wont, that he had the right to send away whom he chose from his house, but not to wound and insult his faithful wife, and that she would complain to God and all the saints of Heaven of his cruel and intolerable injustice. Thus, in spite of herself, she came gradually to reproach him with his evil behaviour, and confronted him with the plain fact that if a man is dissatisfied with his own cap, he tries to throw his neighbour's into the mud.

It went from bad to worse, and when Blanchet finally perceived that he was in the wrong, anger was his only resource. He threatened to shut Madeleine's mouth with a blow, and would have done so, if Jeannie had not heard the noise and come running in between them, without understanding what the matter was, but quite pale and discomfited by so much wrangling. When Blanchet ordered him away, the child cried, and his father took occasion to say that he was ill brought up, a cry-baby, and a coward, and that his mother would never be able to make anything out of him. Then Blanchet plucked up courage, and rose, brandishing his stick, and swearing that he would kill the waif.

When Madeleine saw that he was mad with passion, she threw herself boldly in front of him, and he, disconcerted and taken by surprise, allowed her her way. She snatched his stick out of his hands and threw it far off into the river, and then, standing her ground, she said:

"You shall not ruin yourself by obeying this wicked impulse. Reflect that calamity is swift to follow a man who loses his self-control, and if you have no feeling for others, think of yourself and the probable consequences of a single bad action. For a long time you have been guiding your life amiss, my husband, and now you are hastening faster and faster along a dangerous road. I shall prevent you, at least for to-day, from committing a worse crime, which would bring its punishment both in this world and the next. You shall not kill; return to where you came from, rather than persevere in trying to revenge yourself for an affront which was not offered. Go away; I command you to do so in your own interest, and this is the first time in my life that I have ever commanded you to do anything. You will obey me, because you will see that I still observe the deference I owe you. I swear to you on my word and honour that the waif shall not be here to-morrow, and that you may come back without any fear of meeting him."

Having said this, Madeleine opened the door of the house for her husband, and Cadet Blanchet, baffled by the novelty of her manner, and pleased in the main to receive her submission without danger to his person, clapped his hat upon his head, and without another word returned to Sévère. He did not fail to boast to her and to others that he had administered a sound thrashing to his wife and to the waif; but as this was not true, Sévère's pleasure evaporated in smoke.

When Madame Blanchet was alone again, she sent Jeannie to drive the sheep and the goat to pasture, and went off to a little lonely nook beside the mill-dam, where the earth was much eaten away by the force of the current, and the place so crowded with a fresh growth of branches above the old tree-stumps that you could not see two steps away from you. She was in the habit of going there to pray, for nobody could interrupt her, and she could be as entirely concealed behind the tall weeds as a water-hen in its nest of green leaves.

As soon as she reached there, she sank on her knees to seek in prayer the relief she so needed. But though she hoped this would bring great comfort, she could think of nothing but the poor waif, who was to be sent away, and who loved her so that he would die of grief. So nothing came to her lips, except that she was most unhappy to lose her only support and separate herself from the child of her heart. Then she cried so long and so bitterly that she was suffocated, and, falling full length along the grass, lay unconscious for more than an hour, and it is a miracle that she ever came to herself.

At nightfall she made an effort to collect her powers; and when she heard Jeannie come home singing with the flock, she rose with difficulty and set about preparing supper. Shortly afterward, she heard the noise of the return of the oxen, who were drawing home the oak-tree that Blanchet had bought, and Jeannie ran joyfully to meet his friend François, whose presence he had missed all day. Poor little Jeannie had been grieved for a moment by his father's cruel behaviour to his dear mother, and he had run off to cry in the fields, without knowing what the quarrel could be. But a child's sorrow lasts no longer than the dew of the morning, and he had already forgotten his trouble. He took François by the hand, and skipping as gaily as a little partridge, brought him to Madeleine.

There was no need for the waif to look twice to see that her eyes were reddened and her face blanched.

"Good God," thought he, "some misfortune has happened." Then he turned pale too, and trembled, fixing his eyes on Madeleine, and expecting her to speak to him. She made him sit down, and set his meal before him in silence, but he could not swallow a mouthful. Jeannie eat and prattled on by himself; he felt no uneasiness, for his mother kissed him from time to time and encouraged him to make a good supper.

When he had gone to bed, and the servant was putting the room in order, Madeleine went out, and beckoned François to follow her. She walked through the meadow as far as the fountain, and then calling all her courage to her aid, she said:

"My child, misfortune has fallen upon you and me, and God strikes us both a heavy blow. You see how much I suffer, and out of love for me try to strengthen your own heart, for if you do not uphold me, I cannot tell what will become of me."

François guessed nothing, although he at once supposed that the trouble came from Monsieur Blanchet.

"What are you saying?" said he to Madeleine, kissing her hands as if she were his mother. "How can you think that I shall not have courage to comfort and sustain you? Am not I your servant for as long as I have to stay upon the earth? Am not I your child, who will work for you, and is now strong enough to keep you from want. Leave Monsieur Blanchet alone, let him squander his money, since it is his choice. I shall feed and clothe both you and our Jeannie. If I must leave you for a time, I shall go and hire myself out, though not far from here, so that I can see you every day, and come and spend Sundays with you. I am strong enough now to work and earn all the money you need. You are so careful and live on so little. Now you will not be able to deny yourself so many things for others, and you will be the better for it. Come, Madame Blanchet, my dear mother, calm yourself and do not cry, or I think I shall die of grief."

When Madeleine saw that he had not understood, and that she must tell him everything, she commended her soul to God, and made up her mind to inflict this great pain upon him.

CHAPTER X

"No, François, my son," said she, "that is not it. My husband is not yet ruined, as far as I know anything of his affairs, and if it were only the fear of want, you would not see me so unhappy. Nobody need dread poverty who has courage to work. Since you must hear why it is that I am so sick at heart, let me tell you that Monsieur Blanchet is in a fury against you, and will no longer endure your presence in his house."

"Is that it?" cried François, springing up. "He may as well kill me outright, as I cannot live after such a blow. Yes, let him put an end to me, for he has long disliked me and longed to have me die, I know. Let me see, where is he? I will go to him and say, 'Tell me why you drive me away, and perhaps I can prove to you that you are mistaken in your reasons. But if you persist, say so, that—that——' I do not know what I am saying, Madeleine; truly, I do not know; I have lost my senses, and I can no longer see clearly; my heart is pierced and my head is turning. I am sure I shall either die or go mad."

The poor waif threw himself on the ground, and struck his head with his fists, as he had done when Zabelle had tried to take him back to the asylum.

When Madeleine saw this, her high spirit returned. She took him by the hands and arms, and shaking him, forced him to listen to her.

"If you have no more resignation and strength of will than a child," said she, "you do not deserve my love, and you will shame me for bringing you up as my son. Get up. You are a man in years, and a man should not roll on the ground, as you are doing. Listen, François, and tell me whether you love me enough to go without seeing me for a time. Look, my child, it is for my peace and good name, for otherwise my husband will subject me to annoyance and humiliation. So you must leave me to-day, out of love, just as I have kept you, out of love, to this day; for love shows itself in different ways according to time and circumstance. You must leave me without delay, because, in order to prevent Monsieur Blanchet from committing a crime, I promised that you should be gone to-morrow morning. To-morrow is Saint John's day, and you must go and find a place; but not too near at hand, for if we were able to see each other every day, it would be all the worse in Monsieur Blanchet's mind."

"What has he in his mind, Madeleine? Of what does he complain? How have I behaved amiss? Does he think that you rob the house to help me? That cannot be, because now I am one of his household. I eat only enough to satisfy my hunger, and I do not steal a pin from him. Perhaps he thinks that I take my wages, and that I cost him too much. Very well, let me follow out my purpose of going to explain to him that since my poor mother Zabelle died, I have never received a single penny; or, if you do not want me to tell him this—and indeed if he knew it, he would try to make you pay back all the money due on my wages that you have spent in charity—well, I will make him this proposition for the next year. I will offer to remain in your service for nothing. In this way he cannot think me a burden, and will allow me to stay with you."

"No, no, no, François," cried Madeleine, hastily, "it is not possible; and if you said this to him, he would fly into such a rage with you and me that worse would come of it."

"But why?" asked François; "what is he angry about? Is it only for the pleasure of making us unhappy that he pretends to mistrust me?"

"My child, do not ask the reason of his anger for I cannot tell you. I should be too much ashamed, and you had better not even try to guess; but I can assure you that your duty toward me is to go away. You are tall and strong, and can do without me; and you will earn your living better elsewhere, as long as you will take nothing from me. All sons have to leave their mothers when they go out to work, and many go far away. You must go like the rest, and I shall grieve as all mothers do. I shall weep for you and think of you, and pray God morning and evening to shield you from all ill."

"Yes, and you will take another servant who will serve you ill, who will take no care of your son or your property, who will perhaps hate you, if Monsieur Blanchet orders him not to obey you, and will repeat and misrepresent to him all the kind things you do. You may be unhappy, and I shall not be with you to protect and comfort you. Ah! you think that I have no courage because I am miserable? You believe that I am thinking only of myself, and tell me that I shall earn more money elsewhere! I am not thinking of myself at all. What is it to me whether I gain or lose? I do not even care to know whether I shall be able to control my despair. I shall live or die as may please God, and it makes no difference to me, as long as I am prevented from devoting my life to you. What gives me intolerable anguish is that I see trouble ahead for you. You will be trampled upon in your turn, and if Monsieur Blanchet puts me out of the way, it is that he may the more easily walk over your rights."

"Even if God permits this," said Madeleine, "I must bear what I cannot help. It is wrong to make one's fate worse by kicking against the pricks. You know that I am very unhappy, and you may imagine how much more wretched I should be if I learned that you were ill, disgusted with life, and unwilling to be comforted. But if I can find any consolation in my affliction, it will be because I hear that you are well behaved, and keep up your health and courage out of love for me."

This last excellent reason gave Madeleine the advantage. The waif gave in, and promised on his knees, as if in the confessional, that he would do his best to bear his sorrow bravely.

"Then," said he, as he wiped his eyes, "if I must go to-morrow morning, I shall say good-by to you now, my mother Madeleine. Farewell, for this life, perhaps; for you do not tell me if I shall ever see you and talk with you again. If you do not think I shall ever have such happiness, do not say so, for I should lose courage to live. Let me keep the hope of meeting you one day here by this dear fountain, where I met you the first time nearly eleven years ago. From that day to this, I have had nothing but happiness; I must not forget all the joys that God has given me through you, but shall keep them in remembrance, so that they may help me to bear, from to-morrow onward, all that time and fate may bring. I carry away a heart pierced and benumbed with anguish, knowing that you are unhappy, and that in me you lose your best friend. You tell me that your distress will be greater if I do not take heart, so I shall sustain myself as best I may, by thoughts of you, and I value your affection too much to forfeit it by cowardice. Farewell, Madame Blanchet; leave me here alone a little while; I shall feel better when I have cried my fill. If any of my tears fall into this fountain, you will think of me whenever you come to wash here. I am going to gather some of this mint to perfume my linen. I must soon pack my bundle; and as long as I smell the sweet fragrance among my clothes, I shall imagine that I am here and see you before me. Farewell, farewell, my dear mother; I shall not go back with you to the house. I might kiss little Jeannie, without waking him, but I have not the heart. You must kiss him for me; and to keep him from crying, please tell him to-morrow that I am coming back soon. So, while he is expecting me, he will have time to forget me a little; and then later, you must talk to him of poor

François, so that he may not forget me too much. Give me your blessing, Madeleine, as you gave it to me on the day of my first communion, for it will bring with it the grace of God."

The poor waif knelt down before Madeleine, entreating her to forgive him if he had ever offended her against his will.

Madeleine declared that she had nothing to forgive him, and that she wished her blessing could prove as beneficent as that of God.

"Now," said François, "that I am again a waif, and that nobody will ever love me any more, will not you kiss me as you once kissed me, in kindness, on the day of my first communion? I shall need to remember this, so that I may be very sure that you still love me in your heart, like a mother."

Madeleine kissed the waif in the same pure spirit as when he was a little child. Yet anybody who had seen her would have fancied there was some justification for Monsieur Blanchet's anger, and would have blamed this faithful woman, who had no thought of ill, and whose action could not have displeased the Virgin Mary.

"Nor me, either," put in the priest's servant.

"And me still less," returned the hemp-dresser. Then he resumed:

She returned to the house, but not to sleep. She heard François come in and do up his bundle in the next room, and she heard him go out again at daybreak. She did not get up till he had gone some little distance, so as not to weaken his courage, but when she heard his steps on the little bridge, she opened the door a crack, without allowing herself to be seen, so that she might catch one more last glimpse of him. She saw him stop and look back at the river and mill, as if to bid them farewell. Then he strode away very rapidly, after first picking a branch of poplar and putting it in his hat, as men do when they go out for hire, to show that they are trying to find a place.

Master Blanchet came in toward noon, but did not speak till his wife said:

"You must go out and hire another boy for your mill, for François has gone, and you are without a servant."

"That is quite enough, wife," answered Blanchet. "I shall go, but I warn you not to expect another young fellow.".

As these were all the thanks he gave her for her submission, her feelings were so much wounded that she could not help showing it.

"Cadet Blanchet," said she, "I have obeyed your will; I have sent an excellent boy away without a motive, and I must confess that I did so with regret. I do not ask for your gratitude, but, in my turn, I have something to command you, and that is not to insult me, for I do not deserve it."

She said this in a manner so new to Blanchet, that it produced its effect on him.

"Come, wife," said he, holding out his hand to her, "let us make a truce to all this, and think no more about it. Perhaps I may have been a little hasty in what I said; but you see I had my own reasons for not trusting the waif. The devil is the father of all those children, and he is always after them. They may be good in some ways, but they are sure to be scamps in others. I know that it will be hard for me to find another such hard worker for a servant; but the devil, who is a good father, had whispered wantonness into that boy's ear, and I know one woman who had a complaint against him."

"That woman is not your wife," rejoined Madeleine, "and she may be lying. Even if she told the truth, that would be no cause for suspecting me."

"Do I suspect you?" said Blanchet, shrugging his shoulders. "My grudge was only against him, and now that he has gone, I have forgotten about it. If I said anything displeasing to you, you must take it in jest."

"Such jests are not to my taste," answered Madeleine. "Keep them for those who like them."

CHAPTER XI

Madeleine bore her sorrow very well at first. She heard from her new servant, who had met with François, that he had been hired for eighteen pistoles a year by a farmer, who had a good mill and some land over toward Aigurande. She was happy to know that he had found a good place, and did her utmost to return to her occupations, without grieving too much. In spite of her efforts, however, she fell ill for a long time of a low fever, and pined quietly away, without anybody's noticing it. François was right when he said that in him she lost her best friend. She was sad and lonely, and, having nobody to talk with, she petted all the more her son Jeannie, who was a very nice boy, as gentle as a lamb.

But he was too young to understand all that she had to say of François, and, besides, he showed her no such kind cares and attentions as the waif had done at his age. Jeannie loved his mother, more even than children ordinarily do, because she was such a mother as is hard to find; but he never felt the same wonder and emotion about her as François did. He thought it quite natural to be so tenderly loved and caressed. He received it as his portion, and counted on it as his due, whereas the waif had never been unmindful of the slightest kindness from her, and made his gratitude so apparent in his behaviour, his words and looks, his blushes and tears, that when Madeleine was with him she forgot that her home was bereft of peace, love, and comfort.

When she was left again forlorn, all this evil returned upon her, and she meditated long on the sorrows which François's affectionate companionship had kept in abeyance. Now she had nobody to read with her, to help her in caring for the poor, to pray with her, or even now and then to exchange a few frank, good-natured jests with her. Nothing that she saw or did gave her any more pleasure, and her thoughts wandered back to the time when she had with her such a kind, gentle, and loving friend. Whether she went into her vineyard, into her orchard, or into the mill, there was not a spot as large as a pocket-handkerchief, that she had not passed over ten thousand times, with this child clinging to her skirts, or this faithful, zealous friend at her side. It was as if she had lost a son of great worth and promise; and it was in vain she heaped her affection on the one who still remained, for half her heart was left untenanted.

Her husband saw that she was wearing away, and felt some pity for her languid, melancholy looks. He feared lest she might fall seriously ill, and was loath to lose her, as she was a skilful manager, and saved on her side as much as he wasted on his. As Sévère would not allow him to attend to his mill, he knew that his business would go to pieces if Madeleine no longer had the charge of it, and though he continued to upbraid her from habit, and complained of her lack of care, he knew that nobody else would serve him better.

He exerted himself to contrive some means of curing her of her sickness and sorrow, and just at this juncture it happened that his uncle died. His youngest sister had been under this uncle's guardianship, and now she fell into his own care. He thought, at first, of sending the girl to live with Sévère, but his other relations made him ashamed of this project; and, besides, when Sévère found that the girl was only just fifteen, and promised to be as fair as the day, she had no further desire to be intrusted with such a charge, and told Blanchet that she was afraid of the risks attendant on the care of a young girl.

So Blanchet—who saw that he should gain something by being his sister's guardian, as the uncle, who had brought her up, had left her money in his will; and who was unwilling to place her with any of his other relations—brought her home to his mill, and requested his wife to treat her as a sister and companion, to teach her to work, and let her share in the household labours, and yet to make the task so easy that she should have no desire to go elsewhere.

Madeleine acquiesced gladly in this family arrangement. She liked Mariette Blanchet from the first for the sake of her beauty, the very cause for which Sévère had disliked her. She believed, too, that a sweet disposition and a good heart always go with a pretty face, and she received the young girl not so much as a sister as a daughter, who might perhaps take the place of poor François.

During all this time poor François bore his trouble with as much patience as he had, and this was none at all; for never was man nor boy visited with so heavy an affliction. He fell ill, in the first place, and this was almost fortunate for him, for it proved the kindness of his master's family, who would not allow him to be sent to the hospital, but kept him at home, and tended him carefully. The miller, his present master, was most unlike Cadet Blanchet, and his daughter, who was about thirty years old, and not yet married, had a reputation for her charities and good conduct.

These good people plainly saw, too, in spite of the waif's illness, that they had found a treasure in him.

He was so strong and well-built that he threw off his disease more quickly than most people, and though he set to work before he was cured, he had no relapse. His conscience spurred him on to make up for lost time and repay his master and mistress for their kindness. He still felt ill for more than two months, and every morning, when he began his work, he was as giddy as if he had just fallen from the roof of a house, but little by little he warmed up to it, and never told the trouble it cost him to begin. The miller and his daughter were so well pleased with him that they intrusted him with the management of many things which were far above his position. When they found that he could read and write, they made him keep the accounts, which had never been kept before, and the need of which had often involved the mill in difficulties. In short, he was as well off as was compatible with his misfortune; and as he had the prudence to refrain from saying that he was a foundling, nobody reproached him with his origin.

But neither the kind treatment he received, nor his work, nor his illness, could make him forget Madeleine, his dear mill at Cormouer, his little Jeannie, and the graveyard where Zabelle was lying. His heart was always far away, and on Sundays he did nothing but brood, and so had no rest from the labours of the week. He was at such a distance from his home, which was more than six leagues off, that no news from it ever reached him. He thought at first that he would become used to this, but he was consumed with anxiety, and tried to invent means of finding out about Madeleine, at least twice a year. He went to the fairs for the purpose of meeting some acquaintance from the old place, and if he saw one, he made inquiries about all his friends, beginning prudently with those for whom he cared least, and leading up to Madeleine, who interested him most; and thus he had some tidings of her and her family.

"But it is growing late, my friends, and I am going to sleep in the middle of my story. I shall go on with it tomorrow, if you care to hear it. Good night, all."

The hemp-dresser went off to bed, and the farmer lit his lantern and took Mother Monique back to the parsonage, for she was an old woman, and could not see her way clearly.

CHAPTER XII

THE next evening we all met again at the farm, and the hemp-dresser resumed his story:

François had been living about three years in the country of Aigurande, near Villechiron, in a handsome mill which is called Haut-Champault, or Bas-Champault, or Frechampault, for Champault is as common a name in that country as in our own. I have been twice into those parts, and know what a fine country it is. The peasants there are richer, and better lodged and fed; there is more business there, and though the earth is less fertile, it is more productive. The land is more broken; it is pierced by rocks and washed by torrents, but it is fair and pleasant to the eye. The trees are marvellously beautiful, and two streams, clear as crystal, rush noisily along through their deep-cut channels.

The mills there are more considerable than ours, and the one where François lived was among the richest and best. One winter day, his master, by name Jean Vertaud, said to him:

"François, my servant and friend, I have something to say to you, and I ask for your attention.

"You and I have known each other for some little time. I have done very well in my business, and my mill has prospered; I have succeeded better than others of my trade; in short, my fortune has increased, and I do not conceal from myself that I owe it all to you. You have served me not as a servant, but as a friend and relation. You have devoted yourself to my interests as if they were your own. You have managed my property better than

I knew how to do myself, and have shown yourself possessed of more knowledge and intelligence than I. I am not suspicious by nature, and I should have been often cheated if you had not kept watch of all the people and things about me. Those who were in the habit of abusing my good nature complained, and you bore the brunt boldly, though more than once you exposed yourself to dangers, which you escaped only by your courage and gentleness. What I like most about you is that your heart is as good as your head and hand. You love order, but not avarice. You do not allow yourself to be duped, as I do, and yet you are as fond of helping your neighbours as I can be. You were the first to advise me to be generous in real cases of need, but you were quick to hold me back from giving to those who were merely making a pretence of distress. You have sense and originality. The ideas you put into practice are always successful, and whatever you touch turns to good account.

"I am well pleased with you, and I should like, on my part, to do something for you. Tell me frankly what you want, for I shall refuse you nothing."

"I do not know why you say this," answered François. "You must think, Master Vertaud, that I am dissatisfied with you, but it is not so. You may be sure of that."

"I do not say that you are dissatisfied, but you do not generally look like a happy man. Your spirits are not good. You never laugh and jest, nor take any amusement. You are as sober as if you were in mourning for somebody."

"Do you blame me for this, master? I shall never be able to please you in this respect, for I am fond neither of the bottle nor of the dance; I go neither to the tavern nor to balls; I know no funny stories nor nonsense. I care for nothing which might distract me from my duty."

"You deserve to be held in high esteem for this, my boy, and I am not going to blame you for it. I mention it, because I believe that there is something on your mind.

Perhaps you think that you are taking a great deal of trouble on behalf of other people, and are but poorly paid for it."

"You are wrong in thinking so, Master Vertaud. My reward is as great as I could wish, and perhaps I could never have found elsewhere the high wages which you are willing to allow me, of your own free will, and without any urging from me. You have increased them, too, every year, and, on Saint John's day last, you fixed them at a hundred crowns, which is a very large price for you to pay. If you suffer any inconvenience from it, I assure you that I should gladly relinquish it."

CHAPTER XIII

"Come, come, François, we do not understand each other," returned Master Jean Vertaud; "and I do not know how to take you. You are no fool, and I think my hints have been broad enough; but you are so shy that I will help you out still further. Are not you in love with some girl about here?"

"No, master," was the waif's honest answer.

"Truly?"

"I give you my word."

"Don't you know one who might please you, if you were able to pay your court to her?"

"I have no desire to marry."

"What an idea! You are too young to answer for that. What's your reason?"

"My reason? Do you really care to know, master?"

"Yes, because I feel an interest in you."

"Then I will tell you; there is no occasion for me to hide it: I have never known father or mother. And there is something I have never told you; I was not obliged to do so; but if you had asked me, I should have told you the truth: I am a waif; I come from the foundling asylum."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Jean Vertaud, somewhat taken aback by this confession. "I should never have thought it."

"Why should you never have thought it? You do not answer, Master Vertaud. Very well, I shall answer for you. You saw that I was a good fellow, and you could not believe that a waif could be like that. It is true, then, that nobody has confidence in waifs, and that there is a prejudice against them. It is not just or humane; but since such a prejudice exists, everybody must conform to it, and the best people are not exempt, since you yourself——"

"No, no," said Master Vertaud, with a revulsion of feeling, for he was a just man, and always ready to abjure a false notion; "I do not wish to fail in justice, and if I forgot myself for a moment, you must forgive me, for that is all past now. So, you think you cannot marry, because you were born a waif?"

"Not at all, master; I do not consider that an obstacle. There are all sorts of women, and some of them are so kind-hearted that my misfortune might prove an inducement."

"That is true," cried Jean Vertaud. "Women are better than we are. Yet," he continued, with a laugh, "a fine handsome fellow like you, in the flower of youth, and without any defect of body or mind, might very well add a zest to the pleasure of being charitable. But come, give me your reason."

"Listen," said François. "I was taken from the asylum and nursed by a woman whom I never knew. At her death I was intrusted to another woman, who received me for the sake of the slender pittance granted by the government to those of my kind; but she was good to me, and when I was so unfortunate as to lose her, I should never have been comforted but for the help of another woman, who was the best of the three, and whom I still love so much that I am unwilling to live for any other woman but her. I have left her, and perhaps I may never see her again, for she is well off, and may never have need of me. Still, her husband has had many secret expenses, and I have heard that he has been ill since autumn, so it may be that he will die before long, and leave her with more debts than property. If this happened, master, I do not deny that I should return to the place she lives in, and that my only care and desire would be to assist her and her son, and keep them from poverty by my toil. That is my reason for not undertaking any engagement which would bind me elsewhere. You employ me by the year, but if I married, I should be tied for life. I should be assuming too many duties at once. If I had a wife and children, it is not to be supposed that I could earn enough bread for two families; neither is it to be supposed, if, by extraordinary luck, I found a wife with some money of her own, that I should have the right to deprive my house of its comforts, to bestow them upon another's. Thus I expect to remain a bachelor. I am young, and have time enough before me; but if some fancy for a girl should enter my head, I should try to get rid of it; because, do you see, there is but one woman in the world for me, and that is my mother Madeleine, who never despised me for being a waif, but brought me up as her own child."

"Is that it?" answered Jean Vertaud. "My dear fellow, what you tell me only increases my esteem for you. Nothing is so ugly as ingratitude, and nothing so beautiful as the memory of benefits received. I may have some good reasons for showing you that you could marry a young woman of the same mind as yourself, who would join you in aiding your old friend, but they are reasons which I must think over, and I must ask somebody else's opinion."

No great cleverness was necessary to guess that Jean Vertaud, with his honest heart and sound judgment, had conceived of a marriage between his daughter and François. His daughter was comely, and though she was somewhat older than François she had money enough to make up the difference. She was an only child, and a fine match, but up to this time, to her father's great vexation, she had refused to marry. He had observed lately that she thought a great deal of François, and had questioned her about him, but as she was a very reserved person, he had some difficulty in extorting any confession from her. Finally, without giving a positive answer, she consented to allow her father to sound François on the subject of marriage, and awaited the result with more uneasiness than she cared to show.

Jean Vertaud was disappointed that he had not a more satisfactory answer to carry to her; first, because he was so anxious to have her married, and next, because he could not wish for a better son-in-law than François. Besides the affection he felt for him, he saw clearly that the poor boy who had come to him was worth his weight in gold, on account of his intelligence, his quickness at his work, and his good conduct.

The young woman was a little pained to hear that François was a foundling. She was a trifle proud, but she made up her mind quickly, and her liking became more pronounced when she learned that François was backward in love. Women go by contraries, and if François had schemed to obtain indulgence for the irregularity of his birth, he could have contrived no more artful device than that of showing a distaste toward marriage.

So it happened that Jean Vertaud's daughter decided in François's favour, that day, for the first time.

" Is that all? " said she to her father. " Doesn't he think that we should have both the desire and the means to aid an old woman and find a situation for her son? He cannot have understood your hints, father, for if he knew it was a question of entering our family, he would have felt no such anxiety."

That evening, when they were at work, Jeannette Vertaud said to François:

" I have always had a high opinion of you, François; but it is still higher now that my father has told me of your affection for the woman who brought you up, and for whom you wish to work all your life. It is right for you to feel so. I should like to know the woman, so that I might serve her in case of need, because you have always been so fond of her. She must be a fine woman."

"Oh! yes," said François, who was pleased to talk of Madeleine, "she is a woman with a good heart, a woman with a heart like yours."

Jeannette Vertaud was delighted at this, and, thinking herself sure of what she wanted, went on:

"If she should turn out as unfortunate as you fear, I wish she could come and live with us. I should help you take care of her, for I suppose that she is no longer young. Is not she infirm?"

"Infirm? No," said François; "she is not old enough to be infirm."

"Then is she still young?" asked Jeannette Vertaud, beginning to prick up her ears.

"Oh! no, she is not young," answered François, simply. "I do not remember how old she is now. She was a mother to me, and I never thought of her age."

"Was she attractive?" asked Jeannette, after hesitating a moment before putting the question.

"Attractive?" said François, with some surprise; "do you mean to ask if she is a pretty woman? She is pretty enough for me just as she is; but to tell the truth, I never thought of that. What difference can it make in my affection for her? She might be as ugly as the devil, without my finding it out."

"But cannot you tell me about how old she is?"

"Wait a minute. Her son was five years younger than I. Well! She is not old, but she is not very young; she is about like——"

"Like me?" said Jeannette, making a slight effort to laugh. "In that case, if she becomes a widow, it will be too late for her to marry again, will it not?"

"That depends on circumstances," replied François. "If her husband has not wasted all the property, she would have plenty of suitors. There are fellows who would marry their great-aunts as willingly as their great-nieces for money."

"Then you have no esteem for those who marry for money?"

"I could not do it," answered François.

Simple-hearted as the waif was, he was no such simpleton as not to understand the insinuations which had been made him, and he did not speak without meaning. But Jeannette would not take the hint, and fell still deeper in love with him. She had had many admirers, without paying attention to any of them, and now the only one who pleased her turned his back on her. Such is the logical temper of a woman's mind.

François observed during the following days that she had something on her mind, for she ate scarcely anything, and her eyes were always fixed on him, whenever she thought he was not looking. Her attachment pained him. He respected this good woman, and saw that the more indifferent he appeared, the more she cared about him; but he had no fancy for her, and if he had tried to cultivate such a feeling, it would have been the result of duty and principle rather than of spontaneous affection.

He reflected that he could not stay much longer with Jean Vertaud, because he knew that, sooner or later, such a condition of affairs must necessarily give rise to some unfortunate difference.

Just at this time, however, an incident befell which changed the current of his thoughts.

CHAPTER XIV

One morning the parish priest of Aigurande came strolling over to Jean Vertaud's mill, and wandered round the place for some time before espying François, whom he found at last in a corner of the garden. He assumed a very confidential air, and asked him if he were indeed François, surnamed Strawberry, a name that had been given him in the civil register—where he had been inscribed as a foundling—on account of a certain mark on his left arm. The priest then inquired concerning his exact age, the name of the woman who had nursed him, the places in which he had lived; in short, all that he knew of his birth and life.

François produced his papers, and the priest seemed to be entirely satisfied.

"Very well," said he, "you may come this evening or to-morrow morning to the parsonage; but you must not let anybody know what I am going to tell you, for I am forbidden to make it public, and it is a matter of conscience with me."

When François went to the parsonage, the priest carefully shut the doors of the room, and drawing four little bits of thin paper from his desk, said:

"François Strawberry, there are four thousand francs that your mother sends you. I am forbidden to tell you her name, where she lives, or whether she is alive or dead at the present moment. A pious thought has induced her to remember you, and it appears that she always intended to do so, since she knew where you were to be found, although you lived at such a distance. She knew that your character was good, and gives you enough to establish yourself with in life, on condition that for six months you never mention this gift, unless it be to the woman you want to marry. She enjoins me to consult with you on the investment or the safe deposit of this money, and begs me to lend my name, in case it is necessary, in order to keep the affair secret. I shall do as you like in this respect; but I am ordered to deliver you the money, only in exchange for your word of honour that you will neither say nor do anything that might divulge the secret. I know that I may count upon your good faith; will you pledge it to me?"

François gave his oath and left the money in the priest's charge, begging him to lay it out to the best advantage, for he knew this priest to be a good man; and some priests are like some women, either all good or all bad.

The waif returned home rather sad than glad. He thought of his mother, and would have been glad to give up the four thousand francs for the privilege of seeing and embracing her. He imagined, too, that perhaps she had just died, and that her gift was the result of one of those impulses which come to people at the point of death; and it made him still more melancholy to be unable to bear mourning for her and have masses said for her soul. Whether she were dead or alive, he prayed God to forgive her for forsaking her child, as her child forgave her with his whole heart, and prayed to be forgiven his sins in like manner.

He tried to appear the same as usual; but for more than a fortnight, he was so absorbed in a reverie at meal-times that the attention of the Vertauds was excited.

"That young man does not confide in us," observed the miller. "He must be in love."

"Perhaps it is with me," thought the daughter, "and he is too modest to confess it. He is afraid that I shall think him more attracted by my money than my person, so he is trying to prevent our guessing what is on his mind."

Thereupon, she set to work to cure him of his shyness, and encouraged him so frankly and sweetly in her words and looks that he was a little touched in spite of his preoccupation.

Occasionally, he said to himself that he was rich enough to help Madeleine in case of need, and that he could well afford to marry a girl who laid no claim to his fortune. He was not in love with any woman, but he saw Jeannette Vertaud's good qualities, and was afraid of being hard-hearted if he did not respond to her advances. At times he pitied her, and was almost ready to console her.

But all at once, on a journey which he made to Crevant on his master's business, he met a forester from Presles, who told him of Cadet Blanchet's death, adding that he had left his affairs in great disorder, and that nobody knew whether his widow would be able to right them.

François had no cause to love or regret Master Blanchet, yet his heart was so tender that when he heard the news his eyes were moist and his head heavy, as if he were about to weep; he knew that Madeleine was weeping for her husband at that very moment, that she forgave him everything, and remembered only that he was the father of her child. The thought of Madeleine's grief awoke his own, and obliged him to weep with her over the sorrow which he was sure was hers.

His first impulse was to leap upon his horse and hasten to her side; but he reflected that it was his duty to ask permission of his master.

CHAPTER XV

"MASTER," said he to Jean Vertaud, "I must leave you for a time; how long I cannot tell. I have something to attend to near my old home, and I request you to let me go with a good will; for, to tell the truth, if you refuse to give your permission, I shall not be able to obey you, but shall go in spite of you. Forgive me for stating the case plainly. I should be very sorry to vex you, and that is why I ask you as a reward for all the services that I may have been able to render you, not to take my behaviour amiss, but to forgive the offence of which I am guilty, in leaving your work so suddenly. I may return at the end of a week, if I am not needed in the place where I am going; but I may not come back till late in the year, or not at all, for I am unwilling to deceive you. However, I shall do my best to come to your assistance if you need me, or if anything were to occur which you cannot manage without me. Before I go, I shall find you a good workman to take my place, and, if necessary, offer him as an inducement all that is due on my wages since Saint John's day last. Thus I can arrange matters without loss to you, and you must shake hands to wish me good luck, and to ease my mind of some of the regret I feel at parting with you."

Jean Vertaud knew that the waif seldom asked for anything, but that when he did, his will was so firm that neither God nor the devil could bend it.

"Do as you please, my boy," said he, shaking hands with him. "I should not tell the truth if I said I did not care; but rather than have a quarrel with you, I should consent to anything."

François spent the next day in looking up a servant to take his place in the mill, and he met with a zealous, upright man who was returning from the army, and was happy to find work and good wages under a good master; for Jean Vertaud was recognised as such, and was known never to have wronged anybody.

Before setting out, as he intended to do at daybreak the next day, François wished to take leave of Jeannette Vertaud at supper-time. She was sitting at the barn door, saying that her head ached and that she could not eat. He observed that she had been weeping, and felt much troubled in mind. He did not know how to thank her for her kindness, and yet tell her that he was to leave her in spite of it. He sat down beside her on the stump of an alder-tree, which happened to be there, and struggled to speak, without being able to think of a single word to say. She saw all this, without looking up, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. He made a motion to take her hand in his and comfort her, but drew back as it occurred to him that he could not conscientiously tell her what she wanted to hear. When poor Jeannette found that he remained silent, she was ashamed of her own sorrow, and rising quietly without showing any bitterness of feeling, she went into the barn to weep unrestrained.

She lingered there a little while, in the hope that he would make up his mind to follow her and say a kind word, but he forbore, and went to his supper, which he ate in melancholy silence.

It would be false to say that he had felt nothing for Jeannette when he saw her in tears. His heart was a little fluttered, as he reflected how happy he might be with a person of so excellent a disposition, who was so fond of him, and who was not personally disagreeable to him. But he shook off all these ideas when it returned to his mind that Madeleine might stand in need of a friend, adviser, and servant, and that when he was but a poor, forsaken child, wasted with fever, she had endured, worked, and braved more for him than anybody else in the world.

"Come," said he to himself, when he woke next morning before the dawn; "you must not think of a love-affair or your own happiness and tranquillity. You would gladly forget that you are a waif, and would throw your past to the winds, as so many others do, who seize the moment as it flies, without looking behind them. Yes, but think of Madeleine Blanchet, who entreats you not to forget her, but to remember what she did for you. Forward, then; and Jeanette, may God help you to a more gallant lover than your humble servant."

Such were his reflections as he passed beneath the window of his kind mistress, and if the season had been propitious, he would have left a leaf or flower against her casement, in token of farewell; but it was the day after the feast of the Epiphany; the ground was covered with snow, and there was not a leaf on the trees nor a violet in the grass.

He thought of knotting into the corner of a white handkerchief the bean which he had won the evening before in the Twelfth-night cake, and of tying the handkerchief to the bars of Jeannette's window, to show her that he would have chosen her for his queen, if she had deigned to appear at supper.

"A bean is a very little thing," thought he, "but it is a slight mark of courtesy and friendship, and will make my excuses for not having said good-bye to her."

But a still, small voice within counselled him against making this offering, and pointed out to him that a man should not follow the example of those young girls who try to make men love, remember, and regret them, when they have not the slightest idea of giving anything in return.

"No, no, François," said he, putting back his pledge into his pocket, and hastening his step; "a man's will must be firm, and he must allow himself to be forgotten when he has made up his mind to forget himself."

Thereupon, he strode rapidly away, and before he had gone two gunshots from Jean Vertaud's mill he fancied that he saw Madeleine's image before him, and heard a faint little voice calling to him for help. This dream drew him on, and he seemed to see already the great ash-tree, the fountain, the meadow of the Blanchets, the mill-dam, the little bridge, and Jeannie running to meet him; and in the midst of all this, the memory of Jeannette Vertaud was powerless to hold him back an inch.

He walked so fast that he felt neither cold nor hunger nor thirst, nor did he stop to take breath till he left the high road and reached the cross of Plessys, which stands at the beginning of the path which leads to Presles.

When there, he flung himself on his knees and kissed the wood of the cross with the ardour of a good Christian who meets again with a good friend. Then he began to descend the great track, which is like a road, except that it is as broad as a field. It is the finest common in the world, and is blessed with a beautiful view, fresh air, and extended horizon. It slopes so rapidly that in frosty weather a man could go post-haste even in an ox-cart and take an unexpected plunge in the river, which runs silently below.

François mistrusted this; he took off his sabots more than once, and reached the bridge without a tumble. He passed by Montipouret on the left, not without sending a loving salute to the tall old clock-tower, which is everybody's friend; for it is the first to greet the eyes of those who are returning home, and shows them the right road, if they have gone astray.

As to the roads, I have no fault to find with them in summer-time, when they are green, smiling, and pleasant to look upon. You may walk through some of them with no fear of a sunstroke; but those are the most treacherous of all, because they may lead you to Rome, when you think you are going to Angibault. Happily, the good clock-tower of Montipouret is not chary of showing itself, and through every clearing you may catch a glimpse of its glittering steeple, that tells you whether you are going north or north-west.

The waif, however, needed no such beacon to guide him. He was so familiar with all the wooded paths and by-ways, all the shady lanes, all the hunters' trails, and even the very hedge-rows along the roads, that in the middle of the night he could take the shortest cut, and go as straight as a pigeon flies through the sky.

It was toward noon when he first caught sight of the mill of Cormouer through the leafless branches, and he was happy to see curling up from the roof a faint blue smoke, which assured him that the house was not abandoned to the rats.

For greater speed he crossed the upper part of the Blanchet meadow, and thus did not pass close by the fountain; but as the trees and bushes were stripped of their leaves, he could still see sparkling in the sunlight the open water, that never freezes, because it bubbles up from a spring. The approach to the mill, on the contrary, was icy and so slippery that much caution was required to step safely over the stones and along the bank of the river. He saw the old mill-wheel, black with age and damp, covered with long icicles, sharp as needles, that hung from the bars.

Many trees were missing around the house, and the place was much changed. Cadet Blanchet's debts had called the axe into play, and here and there were to be seen the stumps of great alders, freshly cut, as red as blood. The house seemed to be in bad repair; the roof was ill-protected, and the oven had cracked half open by the action of the frost.

What was still more melancholy was that there was no sound to be heard of man or beast; only a brindled black-and-white dog, a poor country mongrel, jumped up from the doorstep and ran barking toward François; then he suddenly ceased, and came crawling up to him and lay at his feet.

“ Is it you, Labriche, and do you know me? ” said François. “ I did not recognise you, for you are so old and miserable; your ribs stick out, and your whiskers are quite white.”

François talked thus to the dog, because he was distressed, and wanted to gain a little time before entering the house. He had been in great haste up to this moment, but now he was alarmed, because he feared that he should never see Madeleine again, that she might be absent or dead instead of her husband, or that the report of the miller’s death might prove false; in short, he was a prey to all those fancies which beset the mind of a man who has just reached the goal of all his desires.

CHAPTER XVI

FINALLY François drew the latch of the door, and beheld, instead of Madeleine, a lovely young girl, rosy as a May morning and lively as a linnet. She said to him, with an engaging manner: "What is it you want, young man?"

Though she was so fair to see, François did not waste time in looking at her, but cast his eyes round the room in search of Madeleine. He saw nothing but the closed curtains of her bed, and he was sure that she was in it. He did not wait to answer the pretty girl, who was Mariette Blanchet, the miller's youngest sister, but without a word walked up to the yellow bed and pulled the curtains noiselessly aside; there he saw Madeleine Blanchet lying asleep, pale and wasted with fever.

He looked at her long and fixedly, without moving or speaking; and in spite of his grief at her illness, and his fear of her dying, he was yet happy to have her face before him, and to be able to say: "I see Madeleine."

Mariette Blanchet pushed him gently away from the bed, drew the curtains together, and beckoned to him to follow her to the fireside.

"Now, young man," said she, "who are you, and what do you want? I do not know you, and you are a stranger in the neighbourhood. Tell me how I may oblige you."

François did not listen to her, and instead of answering her, he began to ask questions about how long Madame Blanchet had been ill, whether she were in any danger, and whether she were well cared for.

Mariette answered that Madeleine had been ill since her husband's death, because she had over-exerted herself in nursing him, and watching at his bedside, day and night; that they had not as yet sent for the doctor, but that they would do so in case she was worse; and as to her being well cared for, Mariette declared that she knew her duty and did not spare herself.

At these words, the waif looked the girl full in the face, and had no need to ask her name, for besides knowing that soon after he had left the mill Master Blanchet had placed his sister in his wife's charge, he detected in the pretty face of this pretty girl a striking resemblance to the sinister face of the dead miller. There are many fine and delicate faces which have an inexplicable likeness to ugly ones; and though Mariette Blanchet's appearance was as charming as that of her brother had been disagreeable, she still had an unmistakable family look. Only the miller's expression had been surly and irascible, while Mariette's was mocking rather than resentful, and fearless instead of threatening.

So it was that François was neither altogether disturbed nor altogether at ease concerning the attention Madeleine might receive from this young girl. Her cap was of fine linen, neatly folded and pinned; her hair, which she wore somewhat after the fashion of town-bred girls, was very lustrous, and carefully combed and parted; and both her hands and her apron were very white for a sick-nurse. In short, she was much too young, fresh, and gay to spend the day and night in helping a person who was unable to help herself.

François asked no more questions, but sat down in the chimney-corner, determined not to leave the place until he saw whether his dear Madeleine's illness turned for the better or worse.

Mariette was astonished to see him take possession of the fire so cavalierly, just as if he were in his own house. He stared into the blaze, and as he seemed in no humour for talking, she dared inquire no further who he was and what was his business. After a moment, Catherine, who had been the house-servant for eighteen or twenty years, came into the room. She paid no attention to him, but approached the bed of her mistress, looked at her cautiously, and then turned to the fireplace, to see after the potion which Mariette was concocting. Her behaviour showed an intense interest for Madeleine, and François, who took in the truth of the matter in a throb, was on the point of addressing her with a friendly greeting; but——

"But," said the priest's servant, interrupting the hemp-dresser, "you are using an unsuitable word. A *throb* does not express a moment, or a minute."

"I tell you," retorted the hemp-dresser, "that a moment means nothing at all, and a minute is longer than it takes for an idea to rush into the head. I do not know how many millions of things you can think of in a minute, whereas you only need a throb of time to see and hear some one thing that is happening. I will say a little throb, if you please."

"But a throb of time!" objected the old purist.

"Ah! A throb of time! Does that worry you, Mother Monique? Does not everything go by throbs? Does not the sun, when you see it rising in the clouds of flames, and it makes your eyes blink to look at it? And the blood that beats in your veins; the church clock that sifts your time particle by particle, as a bolting-machine does the grain; your rosary when you tell it; your heart when the priest is delayed in coming home; the rain falling drop by drop, and the earth that turns round, as they say, like a mill-wheel? Neither you nor I feel the motion, the machine is too well oiled for that; but there must be some throbbing about it, since it accomplishes its period in twenty-four hours. As to that, too, we use the word *period* when we speak of a certain length of time. So I say a *throb*, and I shall not unsay it. Do not interrupt me any more, unless you wish to tell the story."

"No, no; your machine is too well oiled, too," answered the old woman. "Now let your tongue throb a little longer."

CHAPTER XVII

I WAS saying that François was tempted to speak to big old Catherine, and make himself known to her; but as in the same throb of time he was on the point of crying, he did not wish to behave like a fool, and did not even raise his head. As Catherine stooped over the ashes, she caught sight of his long legs and drew back in alarm.

"What is all that?" whispered she to Mariette in the other corner of the room. "Where does that man come from?"

"Do you ask me?" said the girl; "how should I know? I never saw him before. He came in here, as if he were at an inn, without a good-morning or good-evening. He asked after the health of my sister-in-law as if he were a near relation or her heir; and there he is sitting by the fire, as you see. You may speak to him, for I do not care to do so. He may be a disreputable person."

"What? Do you think he is crazy? He does not look wicked, as far as I can see, for he seems to be hiding his face."

"Suppose he has come for some bad purpose?"

"Do not be afraid, Mariette, for I am near to keep him in check. If he alarms you, I shall pour a kettle of boiling water over his legs, and throw an andiron at his head."

While they were chattering thus, François was thinking of Madeleine.

"That poor dear woman," said he to himself, "who has never had anything but vexation and unkindness from her husband, is now lying ill because she nursed and helped him to the end. Here is this young girl, who was the miller's pet sister, as I have heard say, and her face bears no traces of sorrow. She shows no signs of fatigue or tears, for her eyes are as clear and bright as the sun."

He could not help looking at her from under the brim of his hat, for never until then had he seen such fresh and joyous beauty. Still, though his eyes were charmed, his heart remained untouched.

"Come," continued Catherine, in a whisper to her young mistress, "I am going to speak to him. I must find out his business here."

"Speak to him politely," said Mariette. "We must not irritate him; we are all alone in the house, and Jeannie may be too far away to hear our cries."

"Jeannie!" exclaimed François, who caught nothing from all their prattle except the name of his old friend. "Where is Jeannie, and why don't I see him? Has he grown tall, strong, and handsome?"

"There," thought Catherine, "he asks this because he has some evil intention. Who is the man, for Heaven's sake? I know neither his voice nor his figure; I must satisfy myself and look at his face."

She was strong as a labourer and bold as a soldier, and would not have quailed before the devil himself, so she stalked up to François, determined either to make him take off his hat, or to knock it off herself, so that she might see whether he were a monster or a Christian man. She approached the waif, without suspecting that it was he; for being as little given to thinking of the past as of the future, she had long forgotten all about François, and, moreover, he had improved so much and was now such a handsome fellow that she might well have looked at him several times before recalling him to mind; but just as she was about to accost him rather roughly, Madeleine awoke, and called Catherine, saying in a faint, almost inaudible voice that she was burning with thirst.

François sprang up, and would have been the first to reach her but for the fear of exciting her too much, which held him back. He quickly handed the draught to Catherine, who hastened with it to her mistress, forgetting everything for the moment but the sick woman's condition.

Mariette, too, did her share, by raising Madeleine in her arms, to help her drink, and this was no hard task, for Madeleine was so thin and wasted that it was heartbreaking to see her.

" How do you feel, sister? " asked Mariette.

" Very well, my child," answered Madeleine in the tone of one about to die. She never complained, to avoid distressing the others.

" That is not Jeannie over there," she said, as she caught sight of the waif. " Am I dreaming, my child, or who is that tall man standing by the fire? "

Catherine answered: " We do not know, dear mistress; he says nothing, and behaves like an idiot."

The waif, at this moment, made a little motion to go toward Madeleine, but restrained himself, for though he was dying to speak to her, he was afraid of taking her by surprise. Catherine now saw his face, but he had changed so much in the past three years that she did not recognise him, and thinking that Madeleine was frightened, she said:

" Do not worry, dear mistress; I was just going to turn him out when you called me."

" Don't turn him out," said Madeleine, in a stronger voice, pulling aside the curtain of her bed; " I know him, and he has done right in coming to see me. Come nearer, my son; I have been praying God every day to permit me the grace of giving you my blessing."

The waif ran to her, and threw himself on his knees beside her bed, shedding tears of joy and sorrow that nearly suffocated him. Madeleine touched his hands, and then his head; and said, as she kissed him:

" Call Jeannie; Catherine, call Jeannie, that he may share this happiness with us. Ah! I thank God, François, and I am ready to die now, if such is his will, for both my children are grown, and I may bid them farewell in peace."

CHAPTER XVIII

Catherine rushed off in pursuit of Jeannie, and Mariette was so anxious to know what it all meant, that she followed to ask questions. François was left alone with Madeleine, who kissed him again, and burst into tears; then she closed her eyes, looking still more weak and exhausted than she had been before. François saw that she had fainted, and knew not how to revive her; he was beside himself and could only hold her in his arms, calling her his dear mother, his dearest friend, and imploring her, as if it lay within her power, not to die so soon, without hearing what he had to say.

So, by his tender words, devoted care, and fond endearments he restored her to consciousness, and she began again to see and hear him. He told her that he had guessed she needed him, that he had left all and had come to stay as long as she wanted him, and that, if she would take him for her servant, he would ask nothing but the pleasure of working for her, and the solace of spending his life in her service.

"Do not answer," he continued; "do not speak, my dear mother; you are too weak, and must not say a word. Only look at me, if you are pleased to see me again, and I shall understand that you accept my friendship and help."

Madeleine looked at him so serenely, and was so much comforted by what he said, that they were contented and happy together, notwithstanding the misfortune of her illness.

Jeannie, who came in answer to Catherine's loud cries, arrived to take his share of their joy. He had grown into a handsome boy between fourteen and fifteen, and though not strong, he was delightfully active, and so well brought up that he was always friendly and polite.

"Oh! How glad I am to see you like this, Jeannie," said François. "You are not very tall and strong, but I am satisfied, because I think you will need my help in climbing trees and crossing the river. I see that you are delicate, though you are not ill, isn't it so? Well, you shall be my child, still a little while longer, if you do not mind. Yes, yes; you will find me necessary to you; and you will make me carry out your wishes, just as it was long ago."

"Yes," said Jeannie; "my four hundred wishes, as you used to call them."

"Oho! What a good memory you have! How nice it was of you, Jeannie, not to forget François! But have we still four hundred wishes a day?"

"Oh, no," said Madeleine; "he has grown very reasonable; he has no more than two hundred now."

"No more nor less?" asked François.

"Just as you like," answered Jeannie; "since my darling mother is beginning to smile again, I am ready to agree to anything. I am even willing to say that I wish more than five hundred times a day to see her well again."

"That is right, Jeannie," said François. "See how nicely he talks! Yes, my boy, God will grant those five hundred wishes of yours. We shall take such good care of your darling mother, and shall cheer and gladden her little by little, until she forgets her weariness."

Catherine stood at the threshold, and was most anxious to come in, to see and speak to François, but Mariette held her by the sleeve, and would not leave off asking questions.

"What," said she, "is he a foundling? He looks so respectable."

She was looking through the crack in the door, which she held ajar.

"How comes it that he and Madeleine are such friends?"

"I tell you that she brought him up, and that he was always a very good boy."

"She has never spoken of him to me, nor have you."

"Oh, goodness, no! I never thought of it; he was away; and I almost forgot him; then, I knew, too, that my mistress had been in trouble on his account, and I did not wish to recall it to her mind."

"Trouble! What kind of trouble?"

"Oh! because she was so fond of him; she could not help liking him, he had such a good heart, poor child. Your brother would not allow him in the house, and you know your brother was not always very gentle!"

"We must not say that, now that he is dead, Catherine."

"Yes, yes; you are right; I was not thinking. Dear me, how short my memory is! And yet it is only two weeks since he died! But let me go in, my young lady; I want to give the boy some dinner, for I think he must be hungry."

She shook herself loose, ran up to François, and kissed him. He was so handsome that she no longer remembered having once said that she would rather kiss her sabot than a foundling.

"Oh, poor François," said she, "how glad I am to see you! I was afraid that you would never come back. See, my dear mistress, how changed he is! I wonder that you were able to recognise him at once. If you had not told me who he was, I should not have known him for ages. How handsome he is, isn't he? His beard is beginning to grow; yes, you cannot see it much, but you can feel it. It did not prick when you went away, François, but now it pricks a little. And how strong you are, my friend! What hands and arms and legs you have! A workman like you is worth three. What wages are you getting now?"

Madeleine laughed softly to see Catherine so pleased with François, and was overjoyed that he was so strong and vigorous. She wished that her Jeannie might grow up to be like him. Mariette was ashamed to have Catherine look so boldly in a man's face, and blushed involuntarily. But the more she tried not to look at him, the more her eyes strayed toward him; she saw that Catherine was right; he was certainly remarkably handsome, tall and erect as a young oak.

Then, without stopping to think, she began to serve him very politely, pouring out the best wine of that year's vintage, and recalling his attention when it wandered to Madeleine and Jeannie, and he forgot to eat.

"You must eat more," said she; "you scarcely take anything. You should have more appetite after so long a journey."

"Pay no attention to me, young lady," answered François, at last; "I am too happy to be here to care about eating and drinking. Come now," continued he, turning to Catherine, when the room was put to rights, "show me round the mill and the house, for everything looks neglected, and I want to talk to you about it."

When they were outside, he questioned her intelligently on the state of things, with the air of a man determined to know the whole truth.

"Oh, François," said Catherine, bursting into tears, "everything is going to grief, and if nobody comes to the assistance of my poor mistress, I believe that wicked woman will turn her out of doors, and make her spend all she owns in lawsuits."

"Do not cry," said François, "for if you do, I cannot understand what you say; try to speak more clearly. What wicked woman do you mean? Is it Sévère?"

"Oh! yes, to be sure. She is not content with having ruined our master, but now lays claim to everything he left. She is trying to prosecute us in fifty different ways; she says that Cadet Blanchet gave her promissory notes, and that even if she sold everything over our heads, she would not be paid. She sends us bailiffs every day, and the expenses are already considerable. Our mistress has paid all she could, in trying to pacify her, and I am very much afraid that she will die of this worry, on top of all the fatigue she underwent during her husband's illness. At this rate, we shall soon be without food and fire. The servant of the mill has left us, because he was owed two years' wages, and could not be paid. The mill has stopped running, and if this goes on we shall lose our customers. The horses and crops have been attached, and are to be sold; the trees are to be cut down. Oh, François, it is ruin!"

Her tears began to flow afresh.

"And how about you, Catherine?" asked François; "are you a creditor too? Have your wages been paid?"

"I, a creditor?" said Catherine, changing her wail into a roar; "never, never! It is nobody's business whether my wages are paid or not!"

"Good for you, Catherine; you show the right spirit!" said François. "Keep on taking care of your mistress, and do not bother about the rest. I have earned a little money in my last place, and I have enough with me to save the horses, the crops, and the trees. I am going to pay a little visit to the mill, and if I find it in disorder, I shall not need a wheelwright to set it going again. Jeannie is as swift as a little bird, and he must set out immediately and run all day, and then begin again to-morrow morning, so as to let all the customers know that the mill is creaking like ten thousand devils, and that the miller is waiting to grind the corn."

"Shall we send for a doctor for our mistress?"

"I have been thinking about it; but I am going to wait and watch her all day, before making up my mind.

"Do you see, Catherine, I believe that doctors are useful when the sick cannot do without them; but if the disease is not violent, it is easier to recover with God's help than with their drugs: not taking into consideration that the mere presence of a doctor, which cures the rich, often kills the poor. He cheers and amuses those who live in luxury, but he scares and oppresses those who never see him except in the day of danger. It seems to me that Madame Blanchet will recover very soon if her affairs are straightened.

"And before we finish this conversation, Catherine, tell me one thing more; I ask the truth of you, and you must not scruple to tell it to me. It will go no further; I have not changed, and if you remember me, you must know that a secret is safe in the waif's bosom."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Catherine; "but why do you consider yourself a waif? Nobody will call you any more by that name, for you do not deserve it, François."

"Never mind that. I shall always be what I am, and I am not in the habit of plaguing myself about it. Tell me what you think of your young mistress, Mariette Blanchet."

"Oh, she! She is a pretty girl. Have you already taken it into your head to marry her? She has some money of her own; her brother could not touch her property, because she was a minor, and unless you have fallen heir to an estate, Master François——"

"Waifs never inherit anything," said François, "and as to marrying, I have as much time to think of it as the chestnut in the fire. What I want to hear from you is whether this girl is better than her brother, and whether she will prove a source of comfort or trouble to Madeleine if she stays on here."

"Heaven knows," said Catherine, "for I do not. Until now, she has been thoughtless and innocent enough. She likes dress, caps trimmed with lace, and dancing. She is not very selfish, but she has been so well treated and spoiled by Madeleine that she has never had occasion to show whether she could bite or not. She has never had anything to suffer, so we cannot tell what she may be."

"Was she very fond of her brother?"

"Not very, except when he took her to balls, and our mistress tried to convince him that it was not proper to take a respectable girl in Sévère's company. Then the little girl, who thought of nothing but her own pleasure, overwhelmed her brother with attentions, and turned up her nose at Madeleine, who was obliged to yield. So Mariette does not dislike Sévère as much as I should wish to have her, but I cannot say that she is not good-natured and nice to her sister-in-law."

"That will do, Catherine; I ask nothing further. Only I forbid you to tell the young girl anything of what we have been talking about."

François accomplished successfully all that he had promised Catherine. By evening, owing to Jeannie's diligence, corn arrived to be ground, and the mill too was in working order; the ice was broken and melted about the wheel, the machinery was oiled, and the woodwork repaired wherever it was broken. The energetic François worked till two in the morning, and at four he was up again. He stepped noiselessly into Madeleine's room, and finding the faithful Catherine on guard, he asked how the patient was. She had slept well, happy in the arrival of her beloved servant, and in the efficient aid he brought. Catherine refused to leave her mistress before Mariette appeared, and François asked at what hour the beauty of Cormouer was in the habit of rising.

"Not before daylight," said Catherine.

"What? Then you have two more hours to wait, and you will get no sleep at all."

"I sleep a little in the daytime, in my chair, or on the straw in the barn, while the cows are feeding."

"Very well, go to bed now," said François, "and I shall wait here to show the young lady that some people go to bed later than she, and get up earlier in the morning. I shall busy myself with examining the miller's papers and those which the bailiffs have brought since his death. Where are they?"

"There, in Madeleine's chest," said Catherine. "I am going to light the lamp, François. Come, courage, and try your best to make things straight, as you seem to understand law-papers."

She went to bed, obeying the commands of the waif as if he were the master of the house; for true it is that he who has a good head and good heart rules by his own right.

CHAPTER XIX

Before setting to work, François, as soon as he was left alone with Madeleine and Jeannie (for the young child always slept in the room with his mother), went to take a look at the sleeping woman, and thought her appearance better than when he had first arrived. He was happy to think that she would have no need of a doctor, and that he alone, by the comfort he brought, would preserve her health and fortune.

He began to look over the papers, and was soon fully acquainted with Sévère's claims and the amount of property that Madeleine still possessed with which to satisfy them. Besides all that Sévère had already made Cadet Blanchet squander upon her, she declared that she was still a creditor for two hundred pistoles, and Madeleine had scarcely anything of her own property left in addition to the inheritance that Blanchet had bequeathed to Jeannie—an inheritance now reduced to the mill and its immediate belongings—that is, the courtyard, the meadow, the out-buildings, the garden, the hemp-field, and a bit of planted ground; for the broad fields and acres had melted like snow in the hand of Cadet Blanchet.

"Thank God!" thought François, "I have four hundred pistoles in the charge of the priest of Aigurande, and in case I can do no better, Madeleine can still have her house, the income of her mill, and what remains of her dowry. But I think we can get off more easily than that. In the first place, I must find out whether the notes signed by Blanchet to Sévère were not extorted by stratagem and undue influence, and then I must do a stroke of business on the lands he sold. I understand how such affairs are managed, and knowing the names of the purchasers, I will put my hand in the fire if I cannot bring this to a successful issue."

The fact was that Blanchet, two or three years before his death, straitened for money and over head and ears in debt to Sévère, had sold his land at a low price to whomsoever wanted to buy, and turned all his claims for it over to Sévère, thus expecting to rid himself of her and her comrades who had helped her to ruin him. But, as usually happens in such sales, almost all those who hastened to buy, attracted by the sweet fragrance of the fertile lands, had not a penny with which to pay for them, and only discharged the interest with great difficulty. This state of things might last from ten to twenty years; it was an investment for Sévère and her friends, but a bad investment, and she complained loudly of Cadet Blanchet's rashness, and feared that she would never be paid. So she said, at least; but the speculation was really a reasonably good one. The peasant, even if he has to lie on straw, pays his interest, so unwilling is he to let go the bit of land he holds, which his creditor may seize if he is not satisfied.

We all know this, my good friends, and we often try to grow rich the wrong way, by buying fine property at a low price. However low it may be, it is always too high for us. Our covetousness is more capacious than our purse, and we take no end of trouble to cultivate a field the produce of which does not cover half the interest exacted by the seller.

When we have delved and sweated all our poor lives, we find ourselves ruined, and the earth alone is enriched by our pains and toil. Just as we have doubled its value, we are obliged to sell it. If we could sell it advantageously, we should be safe; but this is never possible. We have been so drained by the interest we have had to pay, that we must sell in haste, and for anything we can get. If we rebel, we are forced into it by the law-courts, and the man who first sold the land gets back his property in the condition in which he finds it; that means that for long years he has placed his land in our hands at eight or ten per cent., and when he resumes possession of it, it is by our labours twice as valuable, in consequence of a careful cultivation which has cost him neither trouble nor expense, and also by the lapse of time which always increases the value of property. Thus we poor little minnows are to be continually devoured by the big fish which pursue us; punished always for our love of gain, and just as foolish as we were before.

Sévère's money was thus profitably invested in a mortgage at a high interest, but at the same time she had a firm hold of Cadet Blanchet's estate, because she had managed him so cleverly that he had pledged himself for the purchasers of his land, and had gone surety for their payment.

François saw all this intrigue, and meditated some possible means of buying back the land at a low price, without ruining anybody, and of playing a fine trick upon Sévère and her clan, by causing the failure of their speculation.

It was no easy matter. He had enough money to buy back almost everything at the price of the original sale, and neither Sévère nor anybody else could refuse to be reimbursed. The buyers would find it to their profit to sell again in all haste, in order to escape approaching ruin; for I tell you all, young and old, if you buy land on credit, you take out a patent for beggary in your old age. It is useless for me to tell you this, for you will have the buying mania no whit the less. Nobody can see a ploughed furrow smoking in the sun without being in a fever to possess it, and it was the peasant's mad fever to hold on to his own piece of soil that caused François's uneasiness.

Do you know what the soil is, my children? Once upon a time, everybody in our parishes was talking about it. They said that the old nobles had attached us to the soil to make us drudge and die, but the Revolution had burst our bonds, and that we no longer drew our master's cart like oxen. The truth is that we have bound ourselves to our own acres, and we drudge and die no less than before.

The city people tell us that our only remedy would be to have no wants or desires. Only last Sunday, I answered a man who was preaching this doctrine very eloquently, that if we poor peasants could only be sensible enough never to eat or sleep, to work all the time, and to drink nothing but fresh clear water, provided the frogs had no objection, we might succeed in saving a goodly hoard, and in receiving a shower of compliments for our wisdom and discretion.

Following this same train of thought, François cudgelled his brains to find some means of inducing the purchasers of the land to sell it back again. He finally hit upon the plan of whispering in their ears the little falsehood, that though Sévère had the reputation of being fabulously rich, she had really as many debts as a sieve has holes, and that some fine morning her creditors would lay hands upon all her claims, as well as upon all her property. He meant to tell them this confidentially, and when they were thoroughly alarmed, he expected to buy back Madeleine Blanchet's lands at the original price, with his own money.

He scrupled, however, to tell this untruth, until it occurred to him that he could give a small bonus to all the poor purchasers, to make them amends for the interest they had already paid. In this manner Madeleine could be restored to her rights and possessions without loss or injury to the purchasers.

The discredit in which Sévère would be involved by his plan caused him no scruple whatever. It is right for the hen to pull out a feather from the cruel bird that has plucked her chickens.

When François had reached this conclusion, Jeannie awoke, and arose softly, to avoid disturbing his mother's slumbers; then, after a good-morning to François, he lost no time in going off to announce to the rest of their customers that the mill was in good order, and that a strong young miller stood in readiness to grind the corn.

CHAPTER XX

It was already broad daylight when Mariette Blanchet emerged from her nest, carefully attired in her mourning, which was so very black and so very white that she looked as spick and span as a little magpie. The poor child had one great care, and that was that her mourning would long prevent her going to dances, and that all her admirers would be missing her. Her heart was so good that she pitied them greatly.

"How is this?" said she, as she saw François arranging the papers in Madeleine's room. "You attend to everything here, Master Miller! You make flour, you settle the business, you mix the medicines; soon we shall see you sewing and spinning."

"And you, my young lady," said François, who saw that she regarded him favourably, although she slashed him with her tongue, "I have never as yet seen you sewing or spinning; I think we shall soon find you sleeping till noon, and it will do you good, and keep your cheeks rosy!"

"Oho! Master François, you are already beginning to tell me truths about myself. You had better take care of that little game; I can tell you something in return."

"I await your pleasure, my young lady."

"It will soon come; do not be afraid, Master Miller. Have the kindness to tell me where Catherine is, and why you are here watching beside our patient. Should you like a hood and gown?"

"Are you going to ask, in your turn, for a cap and blouse, so that you may go to the mill? As I see you do no woman's work, which would be nursing your sister for a little while, I suppose you would like to sift out the chaff, and turn the grindstone. At your service. Let us change clothes."

"It looks as if you were trying to give me a lesson."

"No; you gave me one first, and I am only returning, out of politeness, what you lent me."

"Good! You like to laugh and tease, but you have chosen the wrong time. We are not merry here, and it is only a short time ago that we had to go to the graveyard. If you chatter so much, you will prevent my sister-in-law from getting the sleep she needs so greatly."

"On that very account, you should not raise your voice so much, my young lady; for I am speaking very low, and you are not speaking, just now, as you should in a sick-room."

"Enough, if you please, Master François," said Mariette, lowering her tone, and flushing angrily. "Be so good as to see if Catherine is at hand, and tell me why she leaves my sister-in-law in your charge."

"Excuse me, my young lady," said François, with no sign of temper. "She could not leave her in your charge, because you are too fond of sleeping, so she was obliged to intrust her to mine. I shall not call her, because the poor woman is jaded with fatigue. Without meaning to offend you, I must say that she has been sitting up every night for two weeks. I sent her off to bed, and, until noon, I mean to do her work and mine too, for it is only right for us all to help one another."

"Listen, Master François," said the young girl, with a sudden change of tone; "you appear to hint that I think only of myself and leave all the work to others. Perhaps I should have sat up in my turn, if Catherine had told me that she was tired; but she insisted that she was not at all tired, and I did not understand that my sister was so seriously ill. You think that I have a bad heart, but I cannot imagine where you have learned it. You never knew me before yesterday, and we are not, as yet, intimate enough for you to scold me as you do. You behave exactly as if you were the head of the family, and yet——"

"Come, out with it, beautiful Mariette, say what you have on the tip of your tongue. And yet I was taken in and brought up out of charity, is not it so? And I cannot belong to the family, because I have no family; I have no right to it, as I am a foundling! Is that all you wanted to say?"

As François gave Mariette this straightforward answer, he looked at her in a way that made her blush up to the roots of her hair, for she saw that his expression was that of a stern and serious person, although he appeared so serene and gentle that it was impossible to irritate him, or to make him think or say anything unjust.

The poor child, who was ordinarily so ready with her tongue, was overawed for a moment, but although she was a little frightened, she still felt a desire to please this handsome fellow, who spoke so decidedly and looked her so frankly in the eyes. She was so confused and embarrassed, that it was with difficulty she restrained her tears, and she turned her face quickly the other way to hide her emotion.

He observed it, however, and said very kindly:

"I am not angry, Mariette, and you have no cause to be, on your part. I think no ill of you; I see only that you are young, that there is misfortune in the house, and that you are thoughtless. I must tell you what I think about it."

"What do you think about it?" asked she; "tell me at once, that I may know whether you are my friend or my enemy."

"I think that you are not fond of the care and pains people take for those whom they love who are in trouble. You like to have your time to yourself, to turn everything into sport, to think about your dress, your lovers, and your marriage by and by, and you do not mind having others do your share. If you have any heart, my pretty child, if you really love your sister-in-law, and your dear little nephew, and even the poor, faithful servant who is capable of dying in harness like a good horse, you must wake up a little earlier in the morning, you must care for Madeleine, comfort Jeannie, relieve Catherine, and, above all, shut your ears to the enemy of the family, Madame Sévère, who is, I assure you, a very bad woman. Now you know what I think, neither more nor less."

"I am glad to hear it," said Mariette, rather dryly; "and now please tell me by what right you wish to make me think as you do."

"Oh! This is the way you take it, is it?" answered François. "My right is the waif's right, and to tell you the whole truth, the right of the child who was taken in and brought up by Madame Blanchet; for this, it is my duty to love her as my mother, and my right to try to requite her for her kindness."

"I have no fault to find," returned Mariette, "and I see that I cannot do better than give you my respect at once, and my friendship as time goes on."

"I like that," said François; "shake hands with me on it."

He strode toward her, holding out his great hand, without the slightest awkwardness; but the little Mariette was suddenly stung by the fly of coquetry, and, withdrawing her hand, she announced that it was not proper to shake hands so familiarly with a young man.

François laughed and left her, seeing plainly that she was not frank, and that her first object was to entangle him in a flirtation.

"Now, my pretty girl," thought he, "you are much mistaken in me, and we shall not be friends in the way you mean."

He went up to Madeleine, who had just waked, and who said to him, taking both his hands in hers:

"I have slept well, my son, and God is gracious to let me see your face first of all on waking. How is it that Jeannie is not with you?"

Then, after hearing his explanation, she spoke some kind words to Mariette, telling the young girl how sorry she was to have her sit up all night, and assuring her that she needed no such great care. Mariette expected François to say that she had risen very late; but François said nothing and left her alone with Madeleine, who had no more fever and wanted to try to get up.

After three days, she was so much better that she was able to talk over business affairs with François.

"You may put yourself at ease, my dear mother," said he. "I sharpened my wits when I was away from here, and I understand business pretty well. I mean to see you through these straits, and I shall succeed. Let me have my way; please do not contradict anything I say, and sign all the papers I shall bring you. Now that my mind is at ease on the score of your health, I am going to town to consult some lawyers. It is market-day, and I shall find some people there whom I want to see, and I do not think my time will be wasted."

He did as he said; and after receiving instructions and advice from the lawyers, he saw clearly that the last promissory notes which Blanchet had given Sévère would be a good subject for a lawsuit; for he had signed them when he was beside himself with drink, fever, and infatuation. Sévère believed that Madeleine would not dare to go to law, on account of the expense. François was unwilling to advise Madame Blanchet to embark in a lawsuit, but he thought there was a reasonable chance of bringing the matter to an amicable close if he began by putting a bold face on it; and as he needed somebody to carry a message into the enemy's camp, he bethought himself of a plan which succeeded perfectly.

For several days he had watched little Mariette, and assured himself that she took a daily walk in the direction of Dollins, where Sévère lived, and that she was on more friendly terms with this woman than he could wish, chiefly because she met at her house all her young acquaintances, and some men from town who made love to her. She did not listen to them, for she was still an innocent girl, and had no idea that the wolf was so near the sheepfold, but she loved flattery, and was as thirsty for it as a fly for milk. She kept her walks secret from Madeleine; and as Madeleine never gossiped with the other women, and had not as yet left her sick-room, she guessed nothing, and suspected no evil. Big Catherine was the last person in the world to notice anything, so that the little girl cocked her cap over her ear, and, under the pretext of driving the sheep to pasture, she soon left them in charge of some little shepherd-boy, and was off to play the fine lady in poor company.

François, however, who was going continually to and fro on the affairs of the mill, took note of what the girl was doing. He never mentioned it at home, but turned it to account, as you shall hear.

CHAPTER XXI

He planted himself directly in her way at the river-crossing; and just as she stepped on the foot-bridge which leads to Dollins, she beheld the waif, astride of the plank, a leg dangling on each side above the water, and on his face the expression of a man who has all the time in the world to spare. She blushed as red as a cherry, and if she had not been taken so by surprise, she would have swerved aside, and pretended to be passing by accident.

But the approach to the bridge was obstructed by branches, and she did not see the wolf till she felt his teeth. His face was turned toward her, so she had no means of advancing or retreating without being observed.

"Master Miller," she began, saucily, "can't you move a hairbreadth to let anybody pass?"

"No, my young lady," replied François, "for I am the guardian of this bridge till evening, and I claim the right to collect toll of everybody."

"Are you mad, François? Nobody pays toll in our country, and you have no right on any bridge, or foot-bridge, or whatever you may call it in your country of Aigurande. You may say what you like, but take yourself off from here as quickly as you can; this is not the place for jesting; you will make me tumble into the water."

"Then," said François, without moving, and folding his arms in front of him, "you think that I want to laugh and joke with you, and that my right of toll is that of paying you my court? Pray get rid of that idea, my young lady; I wish to speak sensibly to you, and I will allow you to pass if you give me permission to accompany you for a short part of your way."

"That would not be at all proper," said Mariette, somewhat flustered by her notion of what François was thinking. "What would they say of me hereabouts if anybody met me out walking alone with a man to whom I am not betrothed?"

"You are right," said François; "as Sévère is not here to protect you, people would talk of you; that is why you are going to her house, so that you may walk about in her garden with all your admirers. Very well, so as not to embarrass you, I shall speak to you here, and briefly, for my business is pressing, and this it is. You are a good girl; you love your sister-in-law Madeleine; you see that she is in difficulties, and you must want to help her out of them."

"If that is what you want to say," returned Mariette, "I shall listen to you, for you are speaking the truth."

"Very well, my dear young lady," said François, rising and leaning beside her against the bank beside the little bridge, "you can do a great service to Madame Blanchet. Since it is for her good and interest, as I fondly believe, that you are so friendly with Sévère, you must make that woman agree to a compromise. Sévère is trying to attain two objects which are incompatible: she wants to make Master Blanchet's estate security for the payment of the land he sold for the purpose of paying his debts to her; and in the second place, she means to exact payment of the notes which he signed in her favour. She may go to law, if she likes, and wrangle about this poor little estate, but she cannot succeed in getting more out of it than there is. Make her understand that if she does not insist upon our guaranteeing the payment of the land, we can pay her notes; but if she does not allow us to get rid of one debt, we shall not have funds enough to pay the other, and if she makes us drain ourselves with expenses which bring her no profit, she runs the risk of losing everything."

"That is true," said Mariette; "although I understand very little about business, I think I can understand as much as that. If I am able, by any chance, to influence her, which would be better: for my sister-in-law to pay the notes, or to be obliged to redeem the security?"

"It would be worse for her to pay the notes, for it would be more unjust. We could contest the notes and go to law about them; but the law requires money, and you know that there is none, and never will be any, at the mill. So, it is all one to your sister, whether her little all goes in a lawsuit or in paying Sévère; whereas it is better for Sévère to be paid without having a lawsuit.

"As Madeleine is sure to be ruined in either case, she prefers to have all her possessions seized at once, than to drag on after this under a heavy burden of debt, which may last all her lifetime; for the purchasers of Cadet Blanchet's land are not able to pay for it. Sévère knows this well, and will be forced, some fine day, to take back her land; but this idea is not at all distressing to her, as it will be a profitable speculation for her to receive the land in an improved condition, having long drawn a heavy rate of interest from it. Thus, Sévère risks nothing it setting us free, and assures the payment of her notes."

"I shall do as you say," said Mariette; "and if I fail, you may think as ill of me as you choose."

"Then, good luck, Mariette, and a pleasant walk to you," said François, stepping out of her way.

Little Mariette started off to Dollins, well pleased to have such a fine excuse for going there, for staying a long time, and for returning often during the next few days. Sévère pretended to like what she heard, but she really determined to be in no haste. She had always hated Madeleine Blanchet, because of the involuntary respect her husband had felt for her. She thought she held her safely in her claws for the whole of her lifetime, and preferred to give up the notes, which she knew to be of no great value, rather than renounce the pleasure of harassing her with the burden of an endless debt.

François understood all this perfectly, and was anxious to induce her to exact the payment of this debt, so that he might have an opportunity to buy back Jeannie's broad fields from those who had purchased them for a song. When Mariette returned with her answer, he saw that they were trying to mislead him with words; that, on one hand, the young girl was glad to have her errands last for a long time to come, and that, on the other hand, Sévère had not reached the point of being more desirous for Madeleine's ruin than for the payment of her notes.

To clinch matters, he took Mariette aside, two days afterward.

"My dear young lady," said he, "you must not go to Dollins to-day. Your sister has learned, though I do not know how, that you go there more than once a day, and she says it is no place for a respectable girl. I have tried to make her understand that it is for her interest that you are so friendly with Sévère; but she blamed me as well as you. She says that she would rather be ruined than have you lose your reputation, that you are under her guardianship, and that she has authority over you. If you do not obey of your own free will, you will be prevented from going by main force. If you do as she says, she will not mention this to you, as she wishes to avoid giving you pain, but she is very much displeased with you, and it would be well for you to beg her pardon."

François had no sooner unleashed the dog than it began to bark and bite. He was correct in his estimate of little Mariette's temper, which was as hasty and inflammable as her brother's had been.

"Indeed, indeed!" she exclaimed; "do you expect me to obey my sister-in-law as if I were a child of three? You talk as if she were my mother, and I owed her submission! What makes her think that I may lose my reputation? Tell her that it is quite as well buckled on as her own, and perhaps better. Why does she imagine that Sévère is not so good as other people? Is it wicked not to spend the whole day sewing, spinning, and praying? My sister-in-law is unjust because she has a quarrel with her about money, and she thinks she can treat her as she pleases. It is very imprudent of her, for if Sévère wished she could turn her out of the house she lives in; and as Sévère is patient, and does not make use of her advantage, she is certainly better than she is said to be. And this is the way in which you thank me, who have been obliging enough to take part in these disputes, which are no concern of mine! I can tell you, François, that the most respectable people are not always the most prudish, and when I go to Sévère's I do no more mischief than if I stayed at home."

"I don't know about that," said François, who was determined to make all the scum of the vat mount to the surface; "perhaps your sister was right in thinking that you are in some mischief there. Look here, Mariette, I see that you like to go there too well. It is not natural. You have delivered your message about Madeleine's affairs, and since Sévère has sent no answer, it is evident that she means to give none. Do not go back there any more, or I shall think, with Madeleine, that you go with no good intention."

"Then, Master François," cried Mariette, in a fury, "you think you are going to dictate to me? Do you mean to take my brother's place at home, and make yourself master there? You have not enough beard on your chin to give me such a lecture, and I advise you to leave me alone. Your humble servant," she added, adjusting her coif; "if my sister-in-law asks were I am, tell her that I am at Sévère's, and if she sends you after me, you will see how you are received."

She burst the door open violently, and flew off with a light foot toward Dollins; but as François was afraid that her anger would cool on the way, especially as the weather was frosty, he allowed her a little start. He waited until he thought she had nearly reached Sévère's house, and then putting his long legs in motion he ran like a horse let loose, and caught up with her, to make her believe that Madeleine had sent him in pursuit of her.

He was so provoking that she raised her hand against him. He dodged her every time, being well aware that anger evaporates with blows, and that a woman's temper improves when she has relieved herself by striking. Then he ran away, and as soon as Mariette arrived at Sévère's house she made a great explosion. The poor child had really no bad designs; but in the first flame of her anger she disclosed everything, and put Sévère into such a towering passion that François, who was retreating noiselessly through the lane, heard them at the other end of the hemp-field, hissing and crackling like fire in a barn full of hay.

CHAPTER XXII

His plan succeeded admirably, and he was so sure of it that he went over to Aigurande next day, took his money from the priest, and returned at night, carrying the four little notes of thin paper, which were of such great value, and yet made no more noise in his pocket than a crumb of bread in a cap. After a week's time, Sévère made herself heard. All the purchasers of Blanchet's land were summoned to pay up, and as not one was able to do it, Sévère threatened to make Madeleine pay instead.

Madeleine was much alarmed when she heard the news, for she had received no hint from François of what was coming.

"Good!" said he to her, rubbing his hands; "a trader cannot always gain, nor a thief always rob. Madame Sévère is going to make a bad bargain and you a good one. All the same, my dear mother, you must behave as if you thought you were ruined. The sadder you are, the gladder she will be to do what she thinks is to your harm. But that harm is your salvation, for when you pay Sévère you will buy back your son's inheritance."

"What do you expect me to pay her with, my child?"

"With the money I have in my pocket, and which belongs to you."

Madeleine tried to dissuade him; but the waif was headstrong, as he said himself, and no one could loose what he had bound. He hastened to deposit two hundred pistoles with the notary, in the widow Blanchet's name, and Sévère was paid in full, willingly or unwillingly, and also all the other creditors of the estate who had made common cause with her.

Moreover, after François had indemnified all the poor purchasers of the land for their losses, he had still enough money with which to go to law, and he let Sévère know that he was about to embark in a lawsuit on the subject of the promissory notes which she had wrongfully and fraudulently extracted from the miller. He set afloat a report which spread far and wide through the land. He pretended that in fumbling about an old wall of the mill which he was trying to prop up, he had found old Mother Blanchet's money-box, filled with gold coins of an ancient stamp, and that by this means Madeleine was richer than she had ever been. Weary of warfare, Sévère consented to a compromise, hoping also that François would be lavish of the crowns which he had so opportunely discovered, and that she could wheedle from him more than he gave her to expect. She got nothing for her pains, however, and he was so hard with her that she was forced to return the notes in exchange for a hundred crowns.

To revenge herself, she worked upon little Mariette, telling her that the money-box of old Mother Blanchet, who was the girl's grandmother, should have been divided between her and Jeannie, that she had a right to her share, and should go to law against her sister.

Then the waif was forced to tell the true source of the money he had provided, and the priest of Aigurande sent him the proofs, in case of there being a lawsuit.

He began by showing these proofs to Mariette, begging her to make no unnecessary disclosures, and making it clear to her that she had better keep quiet. But Mariette would not keep at all quiet; her little brain was excited by the confusion in the family, and the devil tempted the poor child. In spite of all the kindness she had received from Madeleine, who had treated her as a daughter and indulged all her whims, she felt a dislike and jealousy of her sister-in-law, although her pride prevented her from acknowledging it. The truth is that in the midst of her tantrums and quarrels with François, she had inadvertently fallen in love with him, and never suspected the trap which the devil had set for her. The more François upbraided her for her faults and vagaries, the more crazy she was to please him.

She was not the kind of girl to pine and consume away in grief and tears; but it robbed her of her peace to think that François was so handsome, rich, and upright, so kind to everybody, and so clever and brave; that he was a man to shed his last drop of blood for the woman he loved, and yet that none of this was for her, although she was the prettiest and richest girl in the neighbourhood, and counted her lovers by the dozen.

One day she opened her heart to her false friend, Sévère. It was in the pasture at the end of the road of the water-lilies, underneath an old apple-tree that was then in blossom. While all these things were happening, the month of May had come, and Sévère strolled out under the apple-blossoms, to chat with Mariette, who was tending her flock beside the river.

It pleased God that François, who was near by, should overhear their conversation. He had seen Sévère enter the pasture, and at once suspected her of meditating some intrigue against Madeleine; and as the river was low, he walked noiselessly along the bank, beneath the bushes which are so tall just there that a hay-cart could pass under their shade. When he came within hearing distance, he sat down on the ground, without making a sound, and opened his ears very wide.

The two women plied their tongues busily. In the first place, Mariette confessed to not caring for a single one of her suitors, for the sake of a young miller, who was not at all courteous to her, and the thought of whom kept her awake at night. Sévère, on the other hand, wanted to unite her to a young man of her acquaintance, who was so much in love with the girl that he had promised a handsome wedding-present to Sévère if she succeeded in marrying him to Mariette Blanchet. It appeared also that Sévère had exacted a gratuity beforehand from him and from several others; so she naturally did all in her power to put Mariette out of conceit with François.

"A plague take the waif!" she exclaimed. "What, Mariette, a girl in your position marry a foundling! You would be called Madame Strawberry, for he has no other name. I should be ashamed for you, my poor darling. Then you have no chance; you would be obliged to fight for him with your sister-in-law, for he is her lover, as true as I live."

"Sévère," cried Mariette, "you have hinted this to me more than once; but I cannot believe you; my sister-in-law is too old."

"No, no, Mariette; your sister-in-law is not old enough to do without this sort of thing; she is only thirty, and when the waif was but a boy your brother discovered that he was too familiar with his wife. That is why he gave him a sound thrashing with the butt of his whip and turned him out of doors."

François felt a lively desire to spring out of the bushes and tell Sévère that she lied; but he restrained himself, and sat motionless.

Sévère continued to ring the changes on this subject, and told so many shocking lies that François's face burned, and it was with great difficulty that he kept his patience.

"Then," said Mariette, "he probably means to marry her now that she is a widow; he has already given her a good part of his fortune, and he must wish to have a share in the property which he has bought back."

"Somebody else will outbid him," said the other; "for now that Madeleine had plundered him, she will be on the lookout for a richer suitor, and will be sure to find one. She must take a husband to manage her property, but while she is trying to find him, she keeps this great simpleton with her, who serves her for nothing, and amuses her solitude."

“If she is going along at that pace,” said Mariette, much vexed, “I am in a most disreputable house, in which I run too many dangers! Do you consider, my dear Sévère, that I am very ill-lodged, and that people will talk against me? Indeed, I cannot stay where I am; I must leave. Oh! yes, these pious women criticise everybody else, because they themselves are shameless only in God’s sight! I should like to hear her say anything against you and me now! Very well! I am going to say good-bye to her, and I am coming to live with you; if she is angry, I shall answer her; if she tries to bring me back by force, to live with her, I shall go to law; and I shall let people know what she is—do you hear?”

“A better remedy for you, Mariette, is to get married as soon as possible. She will not refuse her consent, because I am sure she is anxious to rid herself of you. You stand in the way of her relations with the handsome waif. You must not delay, cannot you understand, for people will say that he belongs to both of you, and then nobody will marry you. Go and get married, then, and take the man I advise.”

“Agreed,” said Mariette, breaking her shepherd’s crook violently against the old apple-tree. “I give you my word. Go and tell him, Sévère; let him come to my house this evening, to ask for my hand, and let our banns be published next Sunday.”

CHAPTER XXIII

Francois was never sadder than when he emerged from the river-bank where he had hidden himself to listen to the women's talk. His heart was as heavy as lead, and when he had gone half-way home he lost courage to return, and, stepping aside into the path of the water-lilies, he sat down in the little grove of oaks, at the end of the meadow.

Once there, by himself, he wept like a child, and his heart was bursting with sorrow and shame; for he was ashamed to hear of what he was accused, and to think that his poor dear friend Madeleine, whom, through all his life, he had loved so purely and constantly, reaped nothing but insult and slander from his devotion and fidelity.

"Oh! my God, my God!" said he to himself, "how can it be that the world is so wicked and that a woman like Sévère can have the insolence to measure the honour of a woman like my dear mother by her own standard? And that little Mariette, who should naturally be inclined to innocence and truth, a child as she is, who does not as yet know the meaning of evil, even she listens to this infernal calumny, and believes in it, as if she knew how it stung! Since this is so, others will believe it too; as the larger part of people living mortal life are old in evil, almost everybody will think that because I love Madame Blanchet, and she loves me, there must be something dishonourable in it."

Then poor François undertook a careful examination of his conscience, and searched his memory to see whether, by any fault of his, he were responsible for Sévère's wicked gossip; whether he had behaved wisely in all respects, or whether, by a lack of prudence and discretion, he had involuntarily given rise to evil thinking. But it was in vain that he reflected, for he could not believe that he had appeared guilty of what had never even crossed his mind.

Still absorbed in thought and reverie, he went on saying to himself:

"Suppose that my liking had turned to loving, what harm would it be in God's sight, now that she is a widow and her own mistress? I have given a good part of my fortune to her and Jeannie, but I still have a considerable share left, and she would not wrong her child if she married me. It would not be self-seeking on my part to desire this, and nobody could make her believe that my love for her is self-interested. I am a foundling, but she does not care for that. She has loved me with a mother's love, which is the strongest of all affections, and now she might love me in another way. I see that her enemies will force me to leave her if I do not marry her, and I should rather die than leave her a second time. Besides, she needs my help, and I should be a coward to leave her affairs in such disorder when I have strength as well as money with which to serve her. Yes, all I have should belong to her, and as she often talks to me about paying me back in the end, I must put that idea out of her head, by sharing all things in common with her, in accordance with the permission of God and the law. She must keep her good name for her son's sake, and she can save it only by marrying me. How is it that I never thought of this before, and that I needed to hear it suggested by a serpent's tongue? I was too simple-minded and unsuspecting; and my poor mother is too charitable to others to take to heart the injuries which are done her. Everything tends toward good, by the will of Heaven; and Madame Sévère, who was plotting mischief, has done me the service of teaching me my duty."

Without indulging any longer in meditation or wonder, François set off on his way home, determined to speak of his plan to Madame Blanchet without loss of time, and on his knees to entreat her to accept him as her protector, in the name of God, and for eternal life.

When he reached Cormouer, he saw Madeleine spinning on her doorstep, and for the first time in his life her face had the effect of making him timid and confused. He was in the habit of walking straight up to her, looking her full in the face to ask her how she did; but this time he paused on the little bridge as if he were examining the mill-dam, and only looked at her out of the corners of his eyes.

When she turned toward him, he moved farther away, not understanding himself what his trouble was, or why a matter which, a few minutes ago, had seemed to him so natural and opportune, should suddenly become so awkward to confess.

Madeleine called him.

"Come here to me," said she, "for I have something to say to you, dear François. We are alone, so come and sit down beside me, and open your heart to me, as if I were your father-confessor, for I want to hear the truth from you."

François was reassured by Madeleine's words, and he sat down beside her.

"I promise, my dear mother," said he, "to open my heart to you as I do to God, and to give you a true confession."

He fancied that something had come to her ears which had brought her to the same conclusion as himself; he was delighted, and waited to hear what she had to say.

"François," she went on, "you are in your twenty-first year, and it is time for you to think of marrying; you are not opposed to it, I hope?"

"No, I am not opposed to anything you wish," answered François, blushing with pleasure; "go on, my dear Madeleine."

"Good!" said she. "I expected this, and I have guessed the right thing. Since you wish it, I wish it too, and perhaps I thought of it before you did. I was waiting to see whether the person in question cared for you, and I think that if she does not as yet, she will very soon. Don't you think so too, and shall I tell you where you stand? Why do you look at me with such a puzzled expression? Don't I speak clearly enough? I see that you are shy about it, and I must help you out. Well, the poor child pouted all the morning because you teased her a little yesterday, and I dare say she thinks you do not love her. But I know that you do love her, and if you scold her sometimes for her little caprices it is because you are a trifle jealous. You must not hold back for that, François. She is young and pretty; but though there is some danger in this, if she truly loves you she will willingly submit herself to you."

"I should like," said François, much disappointed, "to know whom you are talking of, my dear mother, for I am wholly at a loss."

"Really!" said Madeleine; "don't you know what I mean? Am I dreaming, or are you trying to keep a secret from me?"

"A secret from you!" said François, taking Madeleine's hand. He soon dropped it, and took up instead the corner of her apron, which he crumpled as if he were provoked, then lifted toward his lips as if about to kiss it, and finally let go just as he had done with her hand. He was first inclined to cry; then he felt angry, and then giddy, all in succession.

Madeleine was amazed.

"You are in trouble, my child," she cried, "and this means that you are in love—that all does not go as you wish. I can assure you that Mariette has a good heart; she, too, is distressed, and if you speak openly with her she will tell you, in return, that she thinks of no one but you."

François sprang up, and walked up and down the courtyard for some time in silence; then he returned to Madeleine's side.

"I am very much surprised to hear what you have in your mind, Madame Blanchet; this never once occurred to me, and I am well aware that Mariette has no liking for me, and that I am not to her taste."

"Oh, come!" said Madeleine; "you are speaking petulantly, my child! Don't you think I noticed how often you talked with her? Though I could not catch the meaning of what you said, it was evident that she understood very well, for her face glowed like a burning coal. Do you think I do not know that she runs away from the pasture every day, leaving her flock in charge of the first person she meets? Her sheep flourish at the expense of our wheat; but I do not want to cross her, or talk to her of sheep, when her head is full of nothing but love and marriage. The poor child is just of an age to guard her sheep ill, and her heart still worse. But it is great good luck for her, François, that instead of falling in love with one of those bad fellows whom I was so much afraid of her meeting at Sévère's, she had the good sense to think of you. It makes me, too, very happy to think that, when you are married to my sister-in-law, who is almost the same as a daughter to me, you will live with me and make part of my family, and that I may harbour you in my house, work with you, bring up your children, and thus repay your kindness to me. So, do not let your childish notions interfere with all the joys I have planned. Try to see clearly, and forget your jealousy. If Mariette is fond of dress, it is because she is anxious to please you. If she has been rather idle lately, it is only because she is thinking too much of you; and if she answers me sometimes rather sharply, she does so because she is vexed with your reprimands, and does not know whom to blame for them. The proof that she is good and desirous of mending her ways, is that she has recognised your goodness and wisdom, and wants you for her husband."

"You are good, my dear mother," said François, quite crestfallen. "Yes, it is you who are good, for you believe in the goodness of others and deceive yourself. I can tell you that, if Mariette is good too, and I will not say she is not, lest I should injure her in your opinion, it is in a way very different from yours, and, consequently, very displeasing to me. Do not say anything more to me about her. I swear to you on my word and honour, on my heart and soul, that I am no more in love with her than I am with old Catherine, and if she has any regard for me, it is her own misfortune, because I cannot return it. Do not try to make her say she loves me; your tact would be at fault, and you would make her my enemy. It is quite the contrary; hear what she will say to you to-night, and let her marry Jean Aubard, whom she has made up her mind to accept. Let her marry as soon as possible, for she is out of place in your house. She is not happy there, and will not be a source of comfort to you."

"Jean Aubard!" exclaimed Madeleine; "he is not a proper person for her; he is a fool, and she is too clever to submit herself to a stupid man."

"He is rich, and she will not submit to him. She will manage him, and he is just the man for her. Will you not trust in your friend, my dear mother? You know that, up to this time, I have never given you any bad advice. Let the young girl go; she does not love you as she ought, and she does not know your worth."

"You say this because your feelings are hurt, François," said Madeleine, laying her hand on his head and moving it gently up and down, as if she were trying to shake the truth out of it. François was exasperated that she would not believe him, and it was the first time in his life that there had been any dispute between them. He withdrew, saying in a dissatisfied tone of voice:

"Madame Blanchet, you are not just to me. I tell you that girl does not love you. You force me to say this against my will; for I did not come here to bring distrust and strife. So, if I tell it to you, you may know that I am sure of it; and do you think I can love her after that? You cannot love me any more if you will not believe me."

Wild with grief, François rushed off to weep all alone by the fountain.

CHAPTER XXIV

Madeleine was still more perplexed than François, and was on the point of following him with questions and words of encouragement; but she was held back by the sudden appearance of Mariette, who, with a strange expression on her face, announced the offer of marriage she had received from Jean Aubard. Madeleine, who was unable to disabuse herself of the idea that the whole affair was the result of a lovers' quarrel, attempted to speak to the girl of François; but Mariette answered in a tone which gave her great pain, and was utterly incomprehensible to her:

"Those people who care for foundlings may keep them for their own amusement; I am an honest girl, and shall not allow my good name to suffer because my poor brother is dead. I am perfectly independent, Madeleine; and if I am forced by law to ask your advice, I am not forced to take it when it is not for my good. So please do not stand in my way, or I may stand in yours hereafter."

"I cannot imagine what is the matter with you, my dear child," said Madeleine, very sweetly and sadly. "You speak to me as if you had neither respect nor affection for me. I think you must be in some distress which has confused your mind; so I entreat you to take three or four days in which to decide. I shall tell Jean Aubard to come back, and if you are of the same opinion after a little quiet reflection, I shall give you free leave to marry him, as he is a respectable man, and comfortably off. But you are in such an excited condition, just now, that you cannot know your own mind, and you shut your heart against my affection. You grieve me very much, but as I see that you are grieved too, I forgive you."

Mariette tossed her head, to show how much she despised that sort of forgiveness, and ran away to put on her silk apron and prepare for the reception of Jean Aubard, who arrived, an hour later, with big Sévère in gala dress.

This time, at last, Madeleine was convinced of Mariette's ill-will toward her, since the girl had brought into her house, on a family matter, a woman who was her enemy, and whom she blushed to see. Notwithstanding this, she advanced very politely to meet Sévère, and served her with refreshments, without any appearance of anger or dislike; for she feared that if Mariette were opposed she would prove unmanageable. So Madeleine said that she made no objection to her sister-in-law's desire, but requested three days' grace before giving her answer.

Thereupon Sévère said, insolently, that was a very long time to wait. Madeleine answered quietly that it was a very short time.

Jean Aubard then left, looking like a blockhead, and giggling like a booby, for he was sure that Mariette was madly in love with him. He had paid well for this illusion, and Sévère gave him his money's worth.

As Sévère left the house, she said to Mariette that she had ordered a cake and some sweets at home for the betrothal, and even if Madame Blanchet delayed the preliminaries, they must sit down to the feast. Madeleine objected that it was not proper for a young girl to go off in the company of a man who had not as yet received his answer from her family.

"If that is so, I shall not go," said Mariette, in a huff.

"Oh, yes, yes; you must come," Sévère insisted; "are not you your own mistress?"

"No, indeed," returned Mariette; "you see my sister-in-law forbids me to go."

She went into her room and slammed the door; but she merely passed through the house, went out by the back door, and caught up with Sévère and her suitor at the end of the meadow, laughing and jeering at Madeleine's expense.

Poor Madeleine could not restrain her tears when she saw how things were going.

"François was right," thought she; "the girl does not love me, and she is ungrateful at heart. She will not believe that I am acting for her good, that I am most anxious for her happiness, and wish only to prevent her doing something which she will regret hereafter. She has taken evil counsel, and I am condemned to see that wretched Sévère stirring up trouble and strife in my family. I have not deserved all these troubles, and I must submit to God's will. Fortunately, poor François was more clear-sighted than I. How much he would suffer with such a wife!"

She went to look for him, to let him know what she thought; but when she found him in tears beside the fountain, she supposed he was grieving for the loss of Mariette, and attempted to comfort him. The more she said the more pained he was, for it became clear to him that she refused to understand the truth, and that her heart could never feel for him in the way he had hoped.

In the evening, when Jeannie was in bed and asleep, François sat with Madeleine, and sought to explain himself.

He began by saying that Mariette was jealous of her, and that Sévère had slandered her infamously; but Madeleine never dreamed of his meaning.

"What can she say against me?" said she, simply; "and what jealousy can she put into poor silly little Mariette's head? You are mistaken, François; something else is at stake, some interested reason which we shall hear later. It is not possible that she should be jealous; I am too old to give any anxiety to a young and pretty girl. I am almost thirty, and for a peasant woman who has undergone a great deal of trouble and fatigue that is old enough to be your mother. The devil only could say that I think of you in any way but as my son, and Mariette must know I longed to have you both marry. No, no; never believe that she has any such evil thought, or, at least, do not mention it to me, for I should be too much pained and mortified."

"And yet," said François, making a great effort to speak, and bending low over the fire to hide his confusion from Madeleine, "Monsieur Blanchet had some such evil thought when he turned me out of doors!"

"What! Do you know that now, François?" exclaimed Madeleine. "How is it that you know it? I never told you, and I never should have told you. If Catherine spoke of it to you, she did wrong. Such an idea must shock and pain you as much as it does me, but we must try not to think of it any more and to forgive my husband, now that he is dead. All the obloquy of it falls upon Sévère; but now Sévère can be no longer jealous of me. I have no husband, and I am as old and ugly as she could ever have wished, though I am not in the least sorry for it, for I have gained the right of being respected, of treating you as a son, and of finding you a pretty young wife, who will live happily with me and love me as a mother. This is my only wish, François, and you must not distress yourself, for we shall find her. So much the worse for Mariette if she despises the happiness I had in store for her. Now, go to bed, my child, and take courage. If I thought I were any obstacle to your marrying, I should send you away at once; but you may be sure that nobody worries about me, or imagines what is absolutely impossible."

As François listened to Madeleine, he was convinced that she was right, so accustomed was he to believe all that she said. He rose to bid her good night, but, as he took her hand, it happened that, for the first time in his life, he looked at her with the intention of finding out whether she were old and ugly; and the truth is, she had long been so sad and serious that she deceived herself, and was still as pretty a woman as she had ever been.

So when François saw all at once that she was still young and as beautiful as the blessed Virgin, his heart gave a great bound, as if he had climbed to the pinnacle of a tower. He went back for the night to the mill, where his bed was neatly spread in a square of boards among the sacks of flour. Once there, and by himself, he shivered and gasped as if he had a fever; but it was only the fever of love, for he who had all his life warmed himself comfortably in front of the ashes, had suddenly been scorched by a great burst of flame.

CHAPTER XXV

FROM that time on, the waif was so melancholy that it made one's heart ache to see him. He worked like a horse, but he found no more joy or peace, and Madeleine could not induce him to say what was the matter with him. It was in vain he swore that he neither loved nor regretted Mariette, for Madeleine would not believe him, and could assign no other cause for his depression. She was grieved that he should be in distress and yet no longer confide in her, and she was amazed that his trouble should make him so proud and self-willed.

As it was not in her nature to be tormenting, she made up her mind to say nothing further to him on the subject. She attempted to make Mariette reverse her decision, but her overtures were so ill-received that she lost courage, and was silent. Though her heart was full of anguish, she kept it to herself, lest she should add to the burden of others.

François worked for her, and served her with the same zeal and devotion as before. As in the old time, he stayed as much as possible in her company, but he no longer spoke as he used. He was always embarrassed with her, and turned first red as fire, and then white as a sheet in the same minute. She was afraid he was ill, and once took his hand to see if he were feverish; but he drew back from her as if her touch hurt him, and sometimes he reproached her in words which she could not understand.

The trouble between them grew from day to day. During all this time, great preparations were being made for Mariette's marriage to Jean Aubard, and the day which was to end her mourning was fixed as that of the wedding.

Madeleine looked forward to that day with dread; she feared that François would go crazy, and was anxious to send him to spend a little time at Aigurande, with his old master Jean Vertaud, so as to distract his mind. François, however, was unwilling to let Mariette believe what Madeleine insisted upon thinking. He showed no vexation before her, was on friendly relations with her lover, and jested with Sévère, when he met her along the road, to let her see that he had nothing to fear from her. He was present at the wedding; and as he was really delighted to have the house rid of the girl, and Madeleine freed from her false friendship, it never crossed anybody's mind that he had been in love with her. The truth began to dawn even on Madeleine, or at least she was inclined to believe that he had consoled himself. She received Mariette's farewell with her accustomed warmth of heart; but as the young girl still cherished a grudge against her on account of the waif, Madeleine could not help seeing that her sister-in-law left her without love or regret. Inured as she was to sorrow, Madeleine wept over the girl's hardness of heart, and prayed God to forgive her.

After a week had passed, François unexpectedly told her that he had some business at Aigurande that would call him there for the space of five or six days. She was not surprised, and hoped it would be for the good of his health, for she believed that he had stifled his grief, and was ill in consequence.

But that grief, which she thought he had overcome, increased with him day by day. He could think of nothing else, and whether asleep or awake, far or near, Madeleine was always in his heart and before his eyes. It is true that all his life had been spent in loving her and thinking of her, but until lately these thoughts of her had been his happiness and consolation, whereas they were now his despair and his undoing. As long as he was content to be her son and friend, he wished for no better lot on earth; but now his love had changed its character, and he was exquisitely unhappy. He fancied that she could never change as he had done. He kept repeating to himself that he was too young, that she had known him as a forlorn and wretched child, that he could be only an object of care and compassion to her, and never of pride. In short, he believed her to be so lovely and so attractive, so far above him, and so much to be desired, that when she said she was no longer young and pretty, he thought she was adopting a rôle to scare away her suitors.

In the meantime, Sévère, Mariette, and their clan were slandering her openly on his account, and he was in terror lest some of the scandal should come to her ears, and she should be displeased and long for his departure. He knew she was too kind to ask him to go, but he dreaded being again a cause of annoyance to her, as he had been once before, and it occurred to him to go to ask the advice of the priest of Aigurande, whom he had found to be a just and God-fearing man.

He went, but with no success, as the priest was absent on a visit to his bishop; so François returned to the mill of Jean Vertaud, who had invited him for a few days' visit, while waiting for the priest's return.

He found his kind master as true a man and as faithful a friend as he had left him, and his good daughter Jeannette on the brink of marriage with a very respectable man whom she had accepted from motives of prudence rather than of enthusiasm, but for whom she fortunately felt more liking than distaste. This put François more at his ease with her than he had ever been, and the next day being Sunday, he had a long talk with her, and confided in her Madame Blanchet's many difficulties, and his satisfaction in rescuing her from them.

Jeannette was quick-witted, and from one thing and another she guessed that the waif was more agitated by his attachment to Madeleine than he would confess. She laid her hand on his arm, and said to him abruptly:

"François, you must hide nothing from me. I have come to my senses now, and you see that I am not ashamed to tell you that I once thought more of you than you did of me. You knew my feelings, and you could not return them, but you would not deceive me, and no selfish interest led you to do what many others would have done in your place. I respect you both for your behaviour toward me and for your constancy to the woman you loved best in the world; and instead of disowning my regard for you, I am glad to remember it. I expect you to think the better of me for acknowledging it, and to do me the justice to observe that I bear no grudge or malice toward you for your coolness. I mean to give you the greatest possible token of my esteem. You love Madeleine Blanchet, not indeed as a mother, but as a young and attractive woman, whom you wish for your wife."

"Oh!" said François, blushing like a girl, "I love her as a mother, and my heart is full of respect for her."

"I have no doubt of it," answered Jeannette; "but you love her in two ways, for your face says one thing and your words another. Very well, François; you dare not tell her what you dare not even confess to me, and you do not know whether she can answer your two ways of loving."

Jeannette Vertaud spoke with so much sense and sweetness, and showed François such true friendship, that he had not the courage to deceive her, and pressing her hand, he told her that she was like a sister to him, and the only person in the world to whom he had the heart to disclose his secret.

Jeannette asked him several questions, which he answered truly and openly.

"François, my friend," said she, "I understand it all. It is impossible for me to know what Madeleine Blanchet will think about it; but I see that you might be for years in her company without having the boldness to tell her what you have on your mind. No matter. I shall find out for you, and shall let you know. My father and you and I shall set out to-morrow for a friendly visit to Cormouer, as if we went to make the acquaintance of the kind woman who brought up our friend François; you must take my father to walk about the place, under pretext of asking his advice, and I shall spend the time talking with Madeleine. I shall use a great deal of tact, and shall not tell what your feelings are until I am certain of hers."

François was so grateful to Jeannette that he was ready to fall on his knees before her; and Jean Vertaud, who, with the waif's permission, was informed of the situation, gave his consent to the plan. Next day they set out; Jeannette rode on the croup behind her father, and François started an hour earlier than they to prepare Madeleine for the visit she was to receive.

The sun was setting as François approached Cormouer. A storm came up during his ride, and he was drenched to the skin; but he never murmured, for he had good hope in Jeannette's friendly offices, and his heart was lighter than when he had left home. The water was dripping from the bushes, and the blackbirds were singing like mad in thankfulness for a last gleam from the sun before it sank behind the hill of Grand-Corlay. Great flocks of birds fluttered from branch to branch around François, and their joyous chattering cheered his spirits. He thought of the time when he was little, and roamed about the meadows, whistling to attract the birds, absorbed in his childish dreams and fancies. Just then a handsome bullfinch hovered round his head, like a harbinger of good luck and good tidings, and his thoughts wandered back to his Mother Zabelle and the quaint songs of the olden time, with which she used to sing him to sleep.

Madeleine did not expect him so soon. She had even feared that he would never come back at all, and when she caught sight of him, she could not help running to kiss him, and was surprised to see how much it made him blush. He announced the approaching visit, and apparently as much afraid of having her guess his feelings as he was grieved to have her ignore them, in order to prevent her suspecting anything, he told her that Jean Vertaud thought of buying some land in the neighbourhood.

Then Madeleine bestirred herself to prepare the best entertainment she could offer to François's friends.

Jeannette was the first to enter the house, while her father was putting up the horse in the stable; and as soon as she saw Madeleine, she took a great liking for her, a liking which the other woman fully returned. They began by shaking hands, but they soon fell to kissing each other for the sake of their common love for François, and they spoke together freely, as if they had had a long and intimate acquaintance. The truth is they were both excellent women, and made such a pair as is hard to find. Jeannette could not help a pang on seeing Madeleine, whom she knew to be idolised by the man for whom she herself still cherished a lingering fondness; but she felt no jealousy, and tried to forget her grief in the good action on which she was bent. On the other hand, when Madeleine saw the young woman's sweet face and graceful figure, she supposed that it was she whom François had loved and pined for, that they were now betrothed, and that Jeannette had come to bring the news in person; but neither did she feel any jealousy, for she had never thought of François save as her own child.

In the evening, after supper, Father Vertaud, who was tired by his ride, went to bed; and Jeannette took Madeleine out into the garden with her, after first instructing François to keep a little aloof with Jeannie, but still near enough to see her let down the corner of her apron, which she wore tucked up on one side, for this was to be the signal for him to join them. She then fulfilled her mission conscientiously, and so skilfully that Madeleine had no time to exclaim, although beyond measure astonished, as the matter was unfolded to her. At first she thought it but another proof of François's goodness of heart, that he wished to put a stop to all evil gossip, and to devote his life to her service; and she would have refused, thinking it too great a sacrifice on the part of so young a man to marry a woman older than himself. She feared he would repent later, and could not long keep his faith to her, without vexation and regret; but Jeannette gave her to understand that the waif was in love with her, heart and soul, and that he was losing his health and peace of mind because of her.

This was inconceivable to Madeleine. She had lived such a sober and retired life, never adorning her person, never appearing in public, nor listening to flattery, that she had no longer any idea of the impression she might make upon a man.

"Then," said Jeannette, "since he loves you so much, and will die if you refuse him, will you persist in closing your eyes and ears to what I say to you? If you do, it must be because you dislike the poor young fellow, and would be sorry to make him happy."

"Do not say that, Jeannette," answered Madeleine; "I love him almost, if not quite, as much as my Jeannie, and if I had ever suspected that he thought of me in another light, it is quite possible that my affection for him would have been more passionate. But what can you expect? I never dreamed of this, and I am still so dazed that I do not know how to answer. I ask for time to think of it and to talk it over with him, so that I may find out whether he does this from a whim or out of mere pique, or whether, perhaps, he thinks it is a duty he owes me. This I am afraid of most of all, and I think he has repaid me fully for the care I took of him, and it would be too much for him to give me his liberty and himself, at least unless he loves me as you think he does."

When Jeannette heard these words, she let down the corner of her apron, and François, who was waiting near at hand with his eyes fixed upon her, was beside them in an instant. The clever Jeannette asked Jeannie to show her the fountain, and they strolled off together, leaving Madeleine and François together.

But Madeleine, who had expected to put her questions to the waif in perfect calmness, was suddenly covered with shyness and confusion, like a young girl; for confusion such as hers, so sweet and pleasant to see, belongs to no age, but is bred of innocence of mind and purity of life. When François saw that his dear mother blushed and trembled as he did, he received it as a more favourable token than if she had kept her usual serene manner. He took her hand and arm, but he could not speak. Trembling all the while, she tried to shake herself loose and to follow Jeannie and Jeannette, but he held her fast, and made her turn back with him. When Madeleine saw his boldness in opposing his will to hers, she understood, better than if he had spoken, that it was no longer her child, the waif, but her lover, François, that walked by her side.

After they had gone a little distance, silent, but linked arm in arm, as vine is interlaced with vine, François said:

"Let us go to the fountain; perhaps I may find my tongue there."

They did not find Jeannie and Jeannette beside the fountain, for they had gone home; but François found courage to speak, remembering that it was there he had seen Madeleine for the first time, and there, too, he had bidden her farewell, eleven years afterwards. We must believe that he spoke very fluently, and that Madeleine did not gainsay him, for they were still there at midnight. She was crying for joy, and he was on his knees before her, thanking her for accepting him for her husband.

. . . .

"There ends the story," said the hemp-dresser, "for it would take too long to tell you about the wedding. I was present myself, and the same day the waif married Madeleine in the parish of Mers, Jeannette was married in the parish of Aigurande. Jean Vertaud insisted that François and his wife, and Jeannie, who was happy as a king, with their friends, relations, and acquaintances, should come to his house for the wedding-feast, which was finer, grander, and more delightful than anything I have ever seen since."

"Is the story true in all points?" asked Sylvine Courtioux.

"If it is not, it might be," answered the hemp-dresser. "If you do not believe me, go and see for yourself."

PRINTED BY THE TEMPLE PRESS AT LETCHWORTH IN GREAT BRITAIN

Marin County Free Library
Civic Center Administration Building
San Rafael, California